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WOMEN OF THE EARTH LODGES

TRIBAL LIFE ON THE PLAINS

VIRGINIA BERGMAN PETERS

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THE PEOPLE

To the extent that human cultures are shaped by geography, the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara societies are the product of the upper Missouri River valley. Certainly their material culture was largely determined by the resources available to them in that setting, and to a considerable degree their world view was strongly influenced by it as well.

ROY W. MEYER

It was in the center of this forbidding area of the North American continent along the upper Missouri River valley that explorers and fur traders in the mid-eighteenth century came upon a series of bustling, fortified villages inhabited by the Mandan, the Hidatsa, and the Arikara Indians. These village tribes had created a prosperous society with a rich cultural and ceremonial life by farming the river bottoms, hunting buffalo, and trading with their nomadic neighbors.

The village tribes were "North Americans" long before Europeans arrived to name the continent; archeologists have traced their ancestors back at least eight centuries. But these agricultural people, in the heart of the great land mass, did not come face to face with the invaders until nearly three centuries after the first Europeans had set foot on the East and West coasts. In fact, human beings had lived on the Great Plains for thousands of years. They had followed the enormous mammoth and bison (*Bison taylori*) across frozen steppes just below the Wisconsin Glacier at least twelve thousand years ago.¹ The lives of the big game hunters depended entirely upon the huge animals for food, clothing, and shelter. Where the mammoths and the bison went, the people followed. Armed with a few stone implements and weapons (the only remains that have survived), they killed their prey and from them made their tents, their

clothing, and other necessities. As time went by and the big game animals died out and the ice sheets receded, plants and trees began to grow in the more temperate climate, but the people continued to wander in pursuit of smaller game and plant foods for thousands of years. The village tribes, according to archeologists, are not the descendants of these early Plains hunters and gatherers, but rather can be traced to later immigrants.²

About the beginning of the Christian Era some Woodland people moved out of the forests onto the vast Plains region, where their burial mounds still exist today. As they adapted to life on the Plains, they not only learned to hunt the huge buffalo but began to invest this marvelous source of so many of their needs with supernatural powers.³ These people settled along fertile river valleys where they left behind them evidence of dwellings and pottery which suggest more permanent homes than those of the earlier nomadic game hunters. They built substantial houses in villages often fortified by dry moats and palisades. While they relied heavily on hunting deer and bison for their livelihood, they also began to plant small gardens.⁴ No one knows exactly how or when this tremendous step forward occurred, but it revolutionized their lives. With a reliable source of plant food available, the Woodland people could give up their constant wandering in search of daily sustenance and settle into at least semi-permanent homes. From this more stable existence came the impetus to create pottery and other household items too fragile, heavy, or unwieldy to transport in a nomadic life.⁵

While presumably not directly related to the historic village tribes, these rudimentary farmers appear to have had a basic economy similar to that of the Mandan, the Hidatsa, and the Arikara Indians. They no doubt supplemented their diet of buffalo and small game meat and garden produce by fishing, collecting shellfish, and gathering wild fruits and other plant food. They lived on the Plains from around 700 to 1200 A.D.⁶

The earliest village people whom archeologists regard as ancestors of the Mandan lived from about 1100 to 1400 A.D. along the Missouri River in North and South Dakota, between the mouth of the White River and that of the Little Missouri, an area covering about five hundred miles.⁷ Extant ruins of their villages show that some were fortified while others were not. Each site contains evidence of from fourteen to forty-five houses. Their long, rectangular dwellings and their pots—created by hand-modeling a lump of clay, shaping it with a grooved paddle and smoothing it with cord-roughened bits of old pots—are clues which suggest that the historic Mandan culture grew directly from that of these earlier villagers.⁸

From about 1400 to 1600 A.D. great changes occurred in the early Mandan villages. At this time the Hidatsa were settling peaceably along the Mandan northern boundary while the Arikara were encroaching on the southern periphery. As a result, the Mandan withdrew from the White River on the south and the Little Missouri on the north to an area barely one hundred miles long between the Cannonball and Knife rivers.⁹

About 1500 A.D., these early Mandan built a village a few miles below the mouth of the Heart River.¹⁰ This site is noteworthy because remains of up to 103 dwellings still exist, showing that some long, rectangular houses and others of a new design existed side by side. The lodges were set in rows parallel to the river bank but facing southwest away from it on an area of almost ten acres. A very large rectangular structure facing away from the river on the northeast end of the plaza served as a ceremonial lodge. A rectangular fortification ditch reinforced by an interior earthwork supporting a "bastioned palisade" enclosed the entire village.¹¹

Of particular interest is the presence in this village of one slightly rounded building supported by four center posts around a central fireplace, indicating a gradual move toward round lodges. It appears to have been copied from people living farther south along the Missouri who were shifting from four-post rectangular to four-post circular lodges—a design which would become typical of the historic village tribes.¹²

The cultural influence of the southern people is also seen in the style of clay pots with atypical rims, and in the change to heavier fortifications. Indeed, as the prehistoric Mandan moved closer together in several sites near the mouth of the Heart River, their villages became much larger and more heavily defended, indicating they were under pressure from surrounding tribes. This period (roughly 1500 to 1700) is referred to by Wood as one of coalescence, as the Mandan way of life was modified by contact with other groups.¹³

The final and historic stage of Mandan history was relatively brief. In 1738, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, le sieur de la Vérendrye, a French fur trader, visited the Mandan in their own villages and brought them, for the first time, into direct contact with Europeans.¹⁴ The following century brought trade and prosperity but also epidemic diseases and attacks from other Indians under pressure from American westward expansion. By 1838, the Mandan nation had been sadly diminished by repeated epidemics of smallpox.¹⁵

The origins of the Hidatsa, also referred to as Minataries and Gros Ventres or Big Bellies, are obscure. Like the Mandan and the Crow, they

are Siouan speakers. Three linguistically related groups—the Awatixa, the Awaxawi, and the Hidatsa proper—took up residence near one another for the purpose of mutual defense, and in historic times recognized each other as members of a single tribal unit, referred to as the Hidatsa. According to tribal legend, supported in part by archeology, the Awatixa have always lived along the Missouri River, while the Awaxawi and the Hidatsa proper came there from somewhere in the East in relatively late prehistoric times.¹⁶

The Awatixa settled briefly with the Mandan in Scattered Village at the mouth of the Heart River, perhaps as early as 1550. But after a short time they established themselves near the mouth of the Knife River, in present-day North Dakota, where they were living when the first white men discovered them. The Awaxawi, who came from eastern North Dakota, settled upriver from the Mandan villages some time in the seventeenth century. Eventually, they also moved north to settle near the mouth of the Knife.

The last to arrive were the Hidatsa proper, who claimed they had "lost their corn" and had to relearn its cultivation from the Mandan. However, it seems probable that they had merely gathered wild potatoes and ground beans until they learned agriculture from the Mandan. In any case, the Hidatsa proper were less sedentary than the Awatixa and the Awaxawi, for they roamed widely from Devils Lake to the Little Missouri, inhabiting their lodges only long enough to plant their corn. Finally, however, they settled down and adopted a way of life scarcely distinguishable from the Mandan.

The modern Crow tribe was part of this complex but they separated from the Hidatsa proper shortly after arriving at the Missouri River. Tradition has it that after a hunt, there was a disagreement over which of two prominent leaders should have the honor of receiving the buffalo paunch, prized for carrying water or other necessities. The man denied the honor took his people and seceded from the Hidatsa. He and his followers became the River Crow, who roamed west of the Missouri.

The exact reasons for the Hidatsa migrations to the Missouri are not known; the Awaxawi and Hidatsa proper may have been pushed westward by pressure from the Cree, Ojibway, and possibly the Assiniboin. These tribes, who had all acquired guns, were also being driven west by the American frontier.¹⁷

The Arikara came out of the central Plains tradition. They were Cad-doan-speaking, agricultural people who built square lodges with rounded corners in their villages in western Iowa, northern Kansas, and south-

central Nebraska. Some time after 1400 A.D., the early Arikara, probably driven by severe drouths on the central Plains, migrated to the upper Missouri and settled on land claimed by the Mandan. During this time the Mandan appear to have adopted the Arikara round lodge to replace their rectangular ones. Sometime between 1450 and 1650 the Arikara consolidated their position so well that the Mandan retreated north, leaving the Arikara in possession of the Missouri south of what is today the North Dakota border.

From the mid-sixteenth century to the historic period, Arikara villages were unfortified, which suggests peaceful relations between the two tribes. Not until the Sioux pushed into the northern Plains in the eighteenth century and increased tensions with the Mandan and Hidatsa did the Arikara fortify their villages.¹⁸

Before the smallpox epidemics of the late eighteenth century, the Mandan numbered over eight thousand and the Hidatsa approximately four thousand people. The Hidatsa proper and the Awatixa were at the mouth of the Knife, the Awaxawi and two groups of Mandan inhabited the Painted Woods region, while the larger part of the Mandan lived at the mouth of the Heart River. The Arikara comprised twice as many people living in twice as many villages between the Big Bend and the Grand rivers. During the smallpox epidemics of the 1770s and 1790s, they lost more than seventy-five percent of their people; the Mandan and Hidatsa lost nearly as many.¹⁹

As the Lewis and Clark expedition moved north along the Missouri River in 1804, they saw evidence of numerous large Arikara villages which had been abandoned. They reported that the Mandan had been reduced from six to three villages.²⁰ But, in spite of these tragedies, Catlin and Maximilian found the village tribes a vigorous and successful people in 1832 and 1833. The village tribes' resilience in the face of such devastating population loss was surely due in part to their strong religious beliefs, which formed the basis of their faith and of their view of themselves.²¹

4

IN A DIFFERENT VOICE: THE PEOPLE TELL THEIR STORY

Creation stories contain within them a conception of the natural or initial order of things. By articulating how things are in the beginning, people . . . make a basic statement about their relationship with nature and about their perception of the source of power in the universe. This relationship, and its projection into the sacred and secular realms, holds the key for understanding sexual identities and corresponding roles.

PEGGY REEVES SANDAY

The village tribes have been written about, described, and judged by travelers, fur traders, explorers, and sailors who plied the steam boats up the rivers from St. Louis. They have been painted by talented artists. They have been studied and analyzed by social scientists. From all these sources we can create a fairly accurate picture of their life.

But what do the Mandan, the Hidatsa, and the Arikara Indians say of themselves? The only written records they left were the pictographs painted on robes and tents showing the brave deeds of warriors and chiefs. The women did not, as a rule, record their accomplishments. Certainly, very few of the white men who visited their villages paid them much attention except to mention in passing that they did all the hard labor. It was several decades after the prosperous villages of the upper Missouri River valley had disappeared and the scattered remnants of the

tribes had been consolidated into one village (before being ultimately confined to a reservation) when missionaries and ethnologists began to ask the Indians to tell their tale of how they had come to be and how they came to live where they did.

Since theirs was an oral culture, the village people had never written down their beliefs and experiences. They had passed them on from generation to generation through the ceremonies which were a part of every activity in the village and through the stories told by one generation to another. These narratives confirm much of the information in the outsiders' eyewitness accounts and give insights into village behaviors that Europeans and Americans often found so fascinating and incomprehensible.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to understanding between Indians and whites came from their totally different attitudes toward the world in which they lived and toward its resources, on which they relied for their existence. Listening to the voices of the village Indians explain how the world was created and how they came to inhabit the upper Missouri River valley may be a start in attempting to see their life through their own eyes and minds.

When the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians talk about the origin of their world, they tell it this way.¹ Itsikamahidiś (First Worker) was the first creator. He made the world and all the people. His first name was Amamikšaś, or Female Earth, because he made the south side of the Missouri River country.² When he first made the world he wanted the earth to be solid, and immovable, and everlasting. But this was no good; nothing ever died and nothing moved. So he covered all the earth, except for one hill, with water.

A man ran down the hill; he was called Lone Man because he was the first man and alone.³ At the water's edge he stopped, wondering where he came from and who his parents were. He turned around and followed his tracks back up the hill; he found one plant which he thought was his mother and a "stone-buffalo-grasshopper," which he decided was his father. Then he went down and began to walk on the water. After a time, another man came walking on the water; it was First Worker. Lone Man asked him who his parents were and First Worker replied that he thought his mother was the sea, and that he had come forth as a wave rose and sank. The two men debated over which was the older; First Worker said *he* was, while Lone Man thought *he* was. They decided to see if they could find out the truth and discover who their parents were. They walked on until they saw two mud hens (ducks which they also called divers).

The two men (who were really gods) asked the ducks what they ate, and the divers replied that they lived off the mud under the water. The men asked if they could have a little mud; the divers said that they could get some, but they would have to risk their lives to do this. The two gods ordered them to bring up the mud; each bird went under the water and came up with a bit of mud in its mouth. First Worker took the mud from one bird and Lone Man from the other. When the divers had brought up four mouthfuls of mud each, the two gods decided to make land, but they were not going to work together. They would work side by side, but they would leave a big river between them. So First Worker made land on the south (west) side and Lone Man on the north (east) side of the river. First Worker's side (from which soft, warm breezes came) represented the female, and Lone Man's side stood for the male (since winds from the north were strong and cold).

First Worker and Lone Man created the ground in one day. They spent the second day making the grass grow. On the third day they made the trees—different kinds of trees on each side of the river. Early on the morning of the fourth day, they began to make animals. First Worker created buffalo, elk, and other animals on the west side, and Lone Man made moose, elk, and cattle on the east side. On the fifth day they made the birds, and on the sixth day they made creeks and other running waters. On the west side First Worker made big and little springs that come out of the earth, and on the east side Lone Man made lakes, both large and small.

After six days the two gods met. They went first to see what Lone Man had accomplished. First Worker thought that the land Lone Man had made was good but would not be best for the people because it was too flat and open. He did not think the cattle were as good as the buffalo which he himself had made.

Next the two gods went to the west side, which First Worker had made. Lone Man liked the people (Lone Man claimed he had made one tribe but some people thought that First Worker had made all the human beings), and the elk, and the buffalo—especially the white ones.⁴ First Worker explained that all future generations would esteem the few white buffalo found among the many dark brown ones.

Before First Worker and Lone Man made the grass and trees, they went all over the world and found the ground to be only sand. There was no grass nor living plants upon the earth, but they found some tiny tracks. They followed the tracks until they overtook a little mouse, whom they addressed:

"How, my friend!" said the two gods.
 "Not so!" said the mouse, (a female one),
 "You are wrong, you are not my friends;
 you are my grandsons!"
 "You must be our grandmother," they said.
 "Yes," she answered.⁵

Then they found other tracks which led them to a large female toad, who said that the ground was her body. She said they were her grandsons too.

Then First Worker went off alone, but Lone Man found a buffalo bull who taught him how to plant and dry tobacco. The buffalo sent Lone Man to Ear-afire who taught him how to make fire and how to light his pipe so that he could smoke tobacco. Lone Man then said, "I will make people resembling me and I will give them ceremonies." And because the buffalo had helped Lone Man, he decreed that the people must have a buffalo skull in every ceremony, and so they did.⁶

The Arikara version of the beginning of time is similar. They tell of how Wolf and Lucky Man met on the shore of a lake. Wolf ordered a duck swimming on the lake to bring some mud from the bottom. He threw the mud to the east and said, "Form into land and let it be prairie and let the buffalo roam over the prairie." Lucky Man asked the duck to bring up more mud, which he threw to the west of the land Wolf had created. He said, "When the people come they shall choose to live on the west side of the Missouri River, for there are hills and valleys so that their ponies, dogs, and buffalo can find shelter in the hills and mountains. You make your country level; in the winter the buffalo will be driven away from there by the storm." Between the land which Wolf made and that created by Lucky Man the Missouri River flowed, dividing the two countries.⁷

Note that for all three of the village tribes, the acts of creation are not performed by one omnipotent God but by a god who makes a mistake when the earth is too hard and starts all over with water. He is a god who finds a fellow deity and shares the responsibility with him. Together they wander until they come upon the source of their existence: the female (mouse), the source from which the creators came, and the female (toad), the ground itself, the ground of being. Various traditions credit First Worker, Lone Man, and Nesaru with creating some or all people, but there is no bitter schism among the believers over this question.⁸ Animals and people are very close and work together and God is in all of

them. Although the narratives of creation seem to imply that the world was created along the Missouri River, the saga of the tribes' journeys allows for the presence of the people in other parts of the world.

When the Hidatsa explain how they happened to live on the Missouri River, they tell it this way.⁹ The Hidatsa proper and the Awaxawi Hidatsa say that they came from under the water of Devil's Lake. There was a vine which grew downward into the underworld where their tribe lived. The people were climbing this vine in order to get out into the world of sunlight. But when part of the tribe had reached the upper land, a woman who was pregnant attempted to climb out. When the vine broke under her weight, the rest of the tribe had to stay below and they are there yet.

The people who had come out dispersed over the land into tribes and First Creator and Lone Man visited them. The people called Mirokac (River Crow, Hidatsa, and Awaxawi) moved north toward Devil's Lake and lived together. One day a fire came down from the sky. After this fire the people separated. The Awaxawi lived south of the lake where they planted corn. The Hidatsa proper and the Crow, with their tobacco ceremonies, stayed farther north near the large lakes, until a flood caused some of the people to escape to Square Buttes on the Missouri River.

The Awatixa tradition states that one named Charred Body lived in a large village in the sky. The people there made their homes in four large earth lodge villages. One day Charred Body heard the buffalo bellowing, a noise which he did not understand. Looking through a hole in the sky, he found that a new land existed below, on which many buffalo were walking. In order to visit this new land, he changed himself into a sacred arrow and descended to the earth. The spirit people living below tried to destroy him. A man named Fire-around-his-ankles enveloped Charred Body and burned the feathers from his arrow.

But Charred Body survived. Before he returned to the sky he made thirteen earth lodges on a high bluff overlooking a creek which now bears his name. He selected thirteen couples, who possessed the spirit of arrows, to fly down to the new land and occupy lodges he had made. The thirteen households increased to thirteen villages because this land was rich. These households became the thirteen Hidatsa clans.

Some Mandan Indians believe that the Heart River is the center of the universe, where Lone Man created the flat prairies east of the Missouri while First Creator (also known as First Worker) fashioned the rugged terrain west of the river. But others say that their people emerged from beneath the earth on the right bank of the Mississippi River near the

ocean. They brought corn with them as they moved north under the leadership of Good Furred Robe. Eventually they arrived at the mouth of the Missouri River. After settling in various places, they finally reached the Heart River where they joined others whom Lone Man and First Creator had placed there. And here they lived until they were discovered by white explorers.¹⁰

The Mandan tell of how they were living in a large village on the bank of the Missouri River at the mouth of the Heart when the people saw four strangers on the north side. The men called across the river but the Mandan did not understand and asked them what they wanted. The strangers replied, "Midiwatadi wawa-hets," which means, "We want to cross the river." Thinking that was their name, the Mandan called them Minitadi or Minitari, which is why the Hidatsa Indians are also called the Minitaries.

The Mandan then took bullboats and brought the four men to the earth lodge of their chief, Good Furred Robe. The Hidatsa or Minitaries told the chief that they would return in four nights, bringing with them their entire tribe. The Mandan prepared a great feast to welcome the strangers, but they did not arrive after four days. Instead, four years passed before a great number of people were seen coming over the prairie on the east side of the river. The Mandan took bullboats across the river and helped the Hidatsa cross. Good Furred Robe befriended the Hidatsa chief and his people, who built a village on a level plain south of the Mandan village.

The two tribes lived peacefully for some while, but as time passed, Good Furred Robe watched the many young men of both tribes. He said to the Hidatsa Chief that before the young men began to quarrel, it would be wise for the Hidatsa to move away. He suggested they build a village at the mouth of the Knife River on the Missouri. Then he took an ear of corn from his sacred bundle, broke it in two, and gave one piece to his friend, the Hidatsa chief. "My friend," he said, "this is my body; I give you half of it." The corn was the Mandan chief's medicine and his god; in sharing this he gave mysterious power to his friend. So they parted, and the Hidatsa ended by living on the Knife River until the white men came.¹¹

When the Arikara describe how they came to live on the Missouri River, they tell it this way.¹² In the forgotten days of old all the people and animals roamed together as a band of wanderers down deep in the earth. They did not know where they came from nor where they were going. They wandered until they came to a dark and gloomy cave, where

they stood for many days, blinded by the darkness and longing to see if there was a better world.¹³ At last Mother Corn, who had been created by Nesaru out of an ear of corn so that she could bring the people out of the depths of the earth, took command.¹⁴ She selected the four fastest birds and sent one to the east, one to the south, one to the north, and one to the west to look for a better world to live in. The birds went as they were directed and were gone for some days. They all returned, but they had no good news to tell the mother, and so they were sad and discouraged.

Then there came forward from the crowd a tiny animal, the long-nosed Mouse or Mole, who thought he could lead the people out of darkness into light. He told Mother Corn that he would make an effort to look for a better world. The Skunk and the Badger came to help. The Mole began to dig upwards, and toiled until he was exhausted. The Skunk worked until he gave out. The Badger worked until he could work no more. Then they all began again. The Mole finally broke through but was blinded by the sunlight. The Skunk began to widen the path. He broke through to the world above, but the sun was too strong, so he turned back. The Badger came forward again and, with his strength, opened the path so that the multitude could march out one by one.

After his hard labor, the Badger lay down:

He saw the skies, the sun, the mountains and all that there was on earth. The sun went down, the stars appeared, and the Night came. . . . The Night put forth his hands and held the Badger's hands, touched him on his head and on his neck, then went on his way. Light came again from the east, the stars disappeared and the moon also. The Badger awoke and saw the sun rising in the east. He felt satisfied with all he had witnessed.¹⁵

The Badger returned to the people and told all this to Mother Corn. Mother Corn went at once to the opening; although it was somewhat small, she got through. Then she marched out and all the people followed. Nesaru from the heavens saw Mother Corn and gave her power to use in times of need. The whole multitude cried for joy, for both people and animals knew that she was the Mother Corn and they all followed her in a triumphant procession as she started out on a long march westward.

After many days marching they came to an obstacle: a wide expanse of water. As they stood on the shore, the Fish, who had power, came and told Mother Corn that he would make a way for them. He went into the

waters and parted them. Mother Corn led as they all marched on dry land through high walls of water. When they came to the shore, the waters came together behind them. After another long march, they came to a second obstacle, which was a thick forest that no one could pass through. The Owl volunteered to make a way for the people. He blew down the trees so that a path was cleared and the people went on. Then they came to the last obstacle, which was a very deep ravine that no man could cross. A bird, the Kingfisher, said he would make a way, which he did; then all the people went across.

They marched on until they came to an open prairie. Here they saw an animal of very strange appearance. It was a buffalo whose horns seemed to reach the sky. His hairs were grass, his horns were trees with thick bark, and on his nose was a big black sunflower. "Most of his outward appearance was in the form of Mother Earth."¹⁶ The Fish and the animals helped the people to kill it. The blood from the buffalo sank into the earth, hardened, and became stone. From this stone the people later made their pipes.¹⁷ When they had butchered the buffalo, they divided his flesh among the different sacred bundles in different villages. They counted and kept all the animal's joints; these are preserved in the sacred bundles.

Then they moved on westward and after many days, Mother Corn called a council and they all met together. The fish, fowl, and animals all agreed they would separate from the people. They gave as much power as they could spare to Mother Corn. She was very thankful because this would allow her to get her food and clothing from any animal that she would like.¹⁸ Although the animals and people separated from each other, the separation was never total. Animals would continue to "give as much power as they could spare" to people and the people would look to animals not only for food, clothing, and shelter, but also for spiritual strength.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara creation myths to an understanding of upper Missouri River culture. Through them the tribes learned how they came to be, and how they came to live along their mighty river. The creation myths were much more than stories or folklore; they formed a creed and their repeated enactment in rituals and ceremonies gave the people a knowledge of their covenant with the world around them—a sense of their place in the scheme of nature. These myths taught the people to revere the earth and all life on it; they provided a guide for personal and tribal attitudes toward animals and fruits of the land. The creation myths and the attitudes they generated were reflected in everything the people did.

5

THE DEEP TRAIL: RELIGION IN VILLAGE CULTURE

Shortly after First Creator and Lone Man had created the earth and the male animals, a mysterious or holy woman named Village-Old-Woman living in the southland learned of this new land. She resolved to create females of each species created by First Creator and Lone Man in order to perpetuate life, and to give the people female creatures to worship. For each species of living males created by the other two culture heroes, she created females to serve as gods as well as food for the people who were to inhabit the world.

NATIVE TRADITION

From birth through childhood, youth, maturity, and old age to death, the life of the upper Missouri River village Indians was surrounded by rituals, prayers, and references to the spirit world. No labor was performed, no expedition undertaken, no use made of any gift from nature without giving thanks and asking for help from the supernatural. To the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara people every animate and inanimate element in and on the earth was endowed with a spirit which was worthy of respect. This is what Joseph Campbell calls addressing all life as "thou." The Indians did not think of an animal, a tree, or a stone as an "it" subordinate to themselves. Each entity was a "thou"—an equal—with human beings and every other element on earth.

Indians as a race, and the village tribes in particular, did not subscribe

to the patriarchal Judeo-Christian attitude of man separate from God and man in dominion over the other creatures or over the land, waters, and sky around him.¹ The Indians saw God in animals, birds, and fish; they saw God in trees, rivers, and mountains. An ink and watercolor painting entitled "Shaman Calling the Buffalo" by modern-day Oglala Sioux Shaman Arthur Amiotte expresses this belief; it depicts a buffalo in the heart of the shaman and a shaman in the heart of a buffalo. The two creatures are united by a deep spiritual bond in which human beings receive the bounty which the animals have the power to bestow. This is reflected in the Arikara creation myth of Mother Corn, who saw the need to separate the people from the animals soon after they all emerged upon the surface of the earth, but remained thankful to them for providing food and clothing for human beings.²

This gratitude explains why village hunters made sacrifices of thanksgiving to the animals they killed, and the head of a household threw a piece of meat into the fire as a sacrifice before partaking of a meal.³ The villagers did not see themselves as subduing the land and animals from which they obtained their daily needs. Indeed, they saw the animals as gods to whom they owed respect, devotion, and thanks, and from whom they could, if they observed the proper rituals, invoke divine blessings upon their daily activities. Moreover, no war or hunting expedition or trading mission occurred without some leading man stopping to sacrifice to a sacred stream, mountain, or other feature of the landscape.⁴ Just as government by consensus was the ideal in human relations, cooperation and respect between humans and all other elements of creation was the model for success in personal and tribal life.

While the actions of the village Indians in their daily life reflected their reverence for the earth and all its gifts, their social organization indicated their recognition of who was responsible for turning nature's gifts into the necessities of life. Women made food, clothing, and tools from buffalo and other animals; they produced the vegetables and grew the corn, which was the staff of life on the Plains. Because women raised the crops, they owned the fields, their agricultural implements, and the lodges, which they also built. Among the Mandan and Hidatsa (the Arikara arrangements were not as clear-cut), matrilineal clans had control over any property not claimed by a specific family.⁵ Kinship was reckoned through the mother, and women remained with their mothers when they married in order to work the land together.⁶ Thus all the necessities of life—as well as life itself—came from the women.

This dependence on women and their regenerative powers is reflected

in the village tribes' mythology and religious life, which recognizes women as the origin of life. First Creator and Lone Man (also known as First Worker and One Man) created the land and the male animals, but they found the source of their own being in the grandmother mouse, and the source of the earth itself in the grandmother toad.⁷ Like the human female who gave birth to each new generation of people, the earth, too, was considered a female principle capable of procreation as the seasons turned and returned from year to year.

This spirit of regeneration is represented in village mythology by Old Woman Who Never Dies, considered the goddess of all vegetation and responsible for the propagation of cultivated crops.⁸ She became the guardian of Grandson, child of the Moon and an earth woman, when he fell to the ground from a hole in the sky. One day Grandson saw old Woman Who Never Dies bathing in the river. Each time she emerged from the water she was a little younger, until she came up as a young girl. That way she never grew old and died. She lived on a large island in the South. Each fall, after the crops were harvested, the corn spirits flew south with the waterbirds to spend the winter with her and each spring she sent them back north with the waterbirds to cause the plants to be reborn.

Clearly, it was no coincidence that the deity who controlled the annual growth of plants was female. In fact, the female presence in the supernatural world of all three tribes was strong and vital.⁹ According to tribal tradition, shortly after the two male gods created the earth and the male animals, a holy woman whose name was Village Old Woman decided to create females of each species to perpetuate life and give the people female creatures to worship. In her search for the Mandan and Hidatsa people, she followed the Missouri River underground to its source in the Rocky Mountains, cutting out the Knife River and its tributaries as she went. She entered the womb of a young woman and thus was born as a girl into a Missouri River village. When she was grown, she created "the Holy Women in the groves of the four directions," Woman Above, and all other female deities.¹⁰ As time went by, she introduced new ceremonies and practices which the people adopted, and ruled that during *any* sacred ceremony, rites must also be performed for the Holy Women she had created. Both men and women performed these rites, and were as respectful toward female deities as they were toward male gods.

From our perspective, it seems natural that societies so directly dependent on plants and other necessities produced and provided by women should have a non-patriarchal religion. But contemporary observers can

be forgiven for not noticing the strong female presence in the colorful ceremonies which depicted the mythology of the groups.

Since the women performed most of the labor necessary for the comfort of the people, it was the men who had leisure to give to ceremonial activities between their hunting or war expeditions. Their rituals were thus more numerous and more elaborate than the women's, but they were not more important. Women were in charge of the ritual blessing of each new earth lodge;¹¹ they carried out annual rites before beginning to plant their gardens and in thanksgiving after the harvest (see chapter 10); their White Buffalo Cow societies were often asked to perform a ceremony if the buffalo were too far away to hunt in safety, and they had an important role of "walking with the buffalo" in the men's buffalo calling ceremonies (see chapter 11).

Another really crucial contribution of the women to the village religious life was their labor, for it was the women who prepared the elaborate costumes worn by the men, as well as the food and gifts distributed so lavishly at the magnificent male ceremonies. More fundamentally, by growing a surplus of corn that could be traded for profit, the women created the economic surplus that allowed the tribes to hold these ceremonies. In a very real sense, the village women were the backbone of the ritual practice of the tribes' religion. And rituals—prescribed by tradition and mythology—were essential to the village tribes, for they ensured success in all tribal endeavors and kept failure, danger, and death at bay.

The village tribes lived for centuries in an inhospitable environment. Then, as pressure from white encroachment grew, they faced constant fear of attack from whites and from other tribes pushed out of their hunting territories by the western expansion of the American territories. Perhaps these threats to their own tribe made them value more than usual all vessels of procreation which made possible the continued existence of the tribes. For life on the Plains had always been haunted by dangers from cruel winters and hot, dry summers, from plagues of drouth and grasshoppers, from attacks by surrounding nomadic tribes, and finally from epidemics of diseases brought by white intruders, against which they had no defense.

The village tribes believed that to live one's life, accomplish one's goals, and overcome the dangers involved in their pursuits required great supernatural power. The acquisition and use of supernatural power was a lifelong quest and obligation for both village men and women. Certain activities brought power to the individual and other activities consumed it.¹² Participating in a hunt or a war expedition, for example, used up

power, but there were ways to create or restore the supernatural force which helped the individual through life. Giving a religious ceremony or participating in one were both a means of tapping into this supernatural power, which could ensure a good hunt or good crops, protect people from their enemies or other dangers, create a sense of community, and help the people accept death when it came.

The village people had a holistic view of the universe in which the animals, nature, and the gods all inhabited the same world; the natural and the supernatural world shared the same space and time. Thus the tribal religion was not separate from the people's everyday life, but an integral part of it. Performing rites to gods to ensure their help and protection for a hunting expedition, for example, was neither more nor less important than the preparations of learning to ride one's horse or gathering weapons and supplies.¹³ Just as there were traditional ways of preparing oneself materially for whatever one might encounter in life, so too there were established ways of gathering supernatural power.

One major source of power lay in owning sacred bundles. These were bundles of symbolic items that related the story of a particular deity or culture hero. There were two types of sacred bundles: tribal and personal.¹⁴ Tribal sacred bundles derived from ancient myths and were associated with culture heroes. Two important Mandan sacred bundles grew out of the legend of Mandan culture hero Good Furred Robe. The Sacred Robe bundle contained a robe and pipe which had belonged to Good Furred Robe as well as fifteen other items of significance to his legend. The Sacred Skull bundle contained the skulls of Good Furred Robe and his two brothers as well as items similar to those of the robe bundle.¹⁵ These bundles were used during ceremonies which reenacted the legend of Good Furred Robe and asked for his supernatural help.

Not everyone could assemble or own sacred bundles and those who did had to follow a set of complicated rules. But ownership and renewal of these bundles became a life's work for those who aspired to personal success and village leadership. In fact, Bowers referred to the village tribes as oligarchies of sacred bundle owners who directed tribal affairs because of the great powers which possession of these bundles gave them.¹⁶ To those families which had the advantage of owning certain tribal sacred bundles connected with important rituals, possession of these bundles brought wealth and prestige.

Among the Mandan, sacred bundles passed from generation to generation through matrilineal clans to male heirs. The oldest son inherited a bundle through his mother. Younger sons or daughters could hold only

partial rights; however, if the older son died, a younger son or a daughter could become titular bundle owner.¹⁷ If a prominent family had no eligible male, they chose a young man from another equally prominent family and arranged a marriage to a daughter by a process known as "choosing a son-in-law and buying him a bundle." After elaborate and costly rituals the son-in-law became the co-owner of the bundle with his wife or she was considered married to his family's bundles.¹⁸

No matter how a man fell heir to a sacred bundle, he had to prove himself worthy to own it. This he did by giving feasts to it before attempting a hunting or war expedition or upon a successful return from such a venture, or he gave a feast to it during a seasonal festival. Finally, with the help of the women of his own family and of his wives (they provided the food and most of the gifts he owed to the older generation of men who taught him the lore and ritual which went with the bundle), he would buy it.

The Hidatsa required an appropriate vision before a young man could acquire a bundle. Nevertheless, father-to-son inheritance of tribal bundles went on from generation to generation, indicating that satisfactory visions could be culturally induced.¹⁹ A Hidatsa man could buy his father's bundle after having a vision which instructed him how to make the purchases. He would previously have made feasts to his father's bundle after winning war honors. Whenever the son put up a feast to his father's bundle, he received some object from it as recognition for what he had done. New bundles were assembled when a complete purchase took place. A clan "father" was chosen to assemble articles, oversee preliminaries, and officiate during the transfer; the son gave the older men gifts and feasts in payment for training him in the rites associated with the bundle.²⁰

The Arikara also inherited the right to own sacred bundles; they recognized three types: those possessed by a society, by a village, and by a private household. The first two were brought out and the contents exposed on great festival occasions; they were an important part of Arikara life. When disease decimated Arikara populations and villages ceased to exist, the people who remained preserved the village bundle and carried it with them when they moved. The custodian of each bundle acquired the rights to it through his family (clan) and took charge of the performance at any ceremony in which it was used.

The village tribes depended upon Old Woman Who Never Dies or Mother Corn to protect their crops; their sacred bundles and the ceremonies given in connection with them reflected this faith. The Arikara ritu-

als, perhaps even more than the Mandan and Hidatsa, paid tribute to the divine gift of corn. The household shrines contained an ear of corn covered by a buffalo hide and a braid of sweet grass for incense.²¹ Here, in private worship, the women recognized the importance of their gardens and of the buffalo to the sustenance of their families.

In all three tribes, children eligible to inherit bundle rites began training at an early age. They were taught that family sacred bundles would protect them until they were old enough to own "gods" of their own. They were assured that their success in life would be in direct proportion to the number and potency of their bundles and gods.²² For although not every family qualified to inherit a tribal bundle or bundles, any man could acquire a personal bundle by suffering and fasting until he saw a vision of an animal who would be his god. His personal sacred bundle would be based on that animal. Then, if under the aegis of his special animal, a man was successful in hunting or war, the potency of his god was accepted and respected. If his vision did not bring success, the man fasted until he had another one that proved powerful, or he gave a feast to buy a bundle whose potency was already established.²³

Crows Heart, a Mandan, explained that the horse was his god because he had led one around the Sacred Cedar by means of thongs in his own flesh until he fell unconscious. Then a horse had come to him in a vision and promised him success in hunting and had sung his sacred song (which, being sacred, could not be divulged to his informant). Crows Heart claimed that he had done everything the horse asked of him and the horse had done everything it had promised.²⁴

All men, whether or not they owned or expected to own inherited bundles, sought personal supernatural powers from the time they were very young. While the men of the village tribes seemed, at least to contemporary observers, to have a great deal of leisure, their somewhat intermittent tasks usually involved danger of injury or death. A hunter could be thrown from his horse and trampled or gored by an angry buffalo; a man on a ritual scalp hunt might himself be killed or seriously injured; trade expeditions to distant tribes involved the possibility of attack by hostile tribes or a chance encounter with a party seeking scalps. No man set out on any such perilous mission without providing himself with every possible advantage, including rigorous training for the task at hand and supernatural power to help him accomplish it.

Fasting was the first important step in the acquisition of this power, and began at the age of eight or nine. Formal occasions when young men could fast included special ceremonies such as the Mandan Okipa or the

Hidatsa Naxpike, other ceremonies given to buy or renew a sacred bundle, the summer buffalo hunt, eagle-trapping excursions, or any war expedition that might be organized at any time. The amount of time a boy or young man spent fasting depended upon his age and circumstances. The younger lads began by fasting one day, increasing the time with the years.²⁵ Each time a youth fasted, he knew that he was participating in something which made him a part of his community and which would bring him that much-coveted power or luck in his own life.

Inflicting self-torture was another method used to gain a supernatural experience. But the term "inflicting self-torture" was coined by white observers; the Indians thought of it as suffering before the gods. Only by making themselves pitiful could they attract a strong supernatural protector.²⁶ For example, young men made arrangements to undergo the ordeal of the Okipa where, after fasting, they were suspended from poles erected in the Okipa lodge by thongs inserted under the skin of chest and back. They hung thus until they fainted and were cut down by the older men keeping watch over them. Having survived this trial, they submitted to having the skin of their legs cut and thongs inserted with which they dragged heavy buffalo skulls about the village until they fell, unable to endure any more. During the summer months, when the Hidatsa left their village to enjoy an outing while augmenting their food supply in their summer hunt, the pleasure of the young men was muted by the knowledge that before the hunt was over, they would drag buffalo skulls by thongs inserted in their legs until they collapsed under the pain and exertion. This action proved their courage and endurance and might induce a vision that would bring power to the individual.

Sometimes on an eagle-catching expedition, they would suspend themselves from the side of a cliff much as the men hung from poles at the Okipa. Crows Heart told of going out to trap eagles and knowing that "someone should suffer for the birds."²⁷ He determined that he should be the one. He went to the top of the hill to "cry" to the spirits in preparation for his ordeal. Then he put a stake at the top of a steep bank. He found two men of his father's clan to cut holes through the skin of his chest and insert wooden sticks into them. At the top of the bank he had coiled around the stake a twenty-five-foot rope which his mentors fastened to the sticks in his body. He then jumped off the bank. The pain when he landed was so intense he lost consciousness but when he revived, he began to pace back and forth with the rope taut, and to cry to the spirits. It was extremely cold, but all night he walked and prayed.

The next morning his father's friends brought him back to camp,

thawed him out, and removed the thongs. He was in great pain for a day and a night but after that he went out to check the flag which would tell if the wind was right to catch eagles. Since every sign was favorable, he went to his pit and in a short time caught two beautiful eagles. The leader of the expedition gave Crows Heart the honor of checking the wind each day to see if all was right to go to the pits, and gave him credit for a successful hunt. If Crows Heart had fasted and suffered until he had a vision but had not been successful in his efforts, he would simply have repeated his ordeal until he had prevailed.

All women fasted at least once during their lifetime. They also made a sacrifice to the sun at the slaying or death of a loved one. Once a Mandan woman lost three brothers killed by Cheyenne who had been at their village trading robes for corn. She cut off two fingers and slashed her arms and legs. When a party departed to avenge the deaths, she fasted four days. Everyone felt the success of the war party that went out to retaliate was ensured by her actions.²⁸ Women usually fasted in their gardens or on their corn scaffolds. A woman could pay for the right to fast on the roof of the Okipa lodge, although she was not allowed inside during the ceremony.

Women rarely fasted more than one day and one night at a time. One reason for this was that women's work was not perceived as being dangerous enough to require a great deal of power. In fact, women were at risk from attacks by the Sioux when working in their fields or out gathering wood, but on such occasions they were protected by escorts of armed men.²⁹ Another practical reason might well have been that adult women had neither the time nor the energy to fast after completing their daily chores. It should not be overlooked, however, that women were the economic mainstay that allowed men the leisure to fast, and indeed to perform all their elaborate rituals.

In addition to acquiring sacred bundles and fasting or suffering, buying one's way up the ladder of age-grade societies also increased a man's supernatural power. Although the men's societies were not sacred, like the sacred ceremonies, they had traditional and mythological origins. They also had many patterns characteristic of sacred ceremonies, such as the giving of feasts and gifts to buy the knowledge necessary for membership. Moreover, members brought with them sacred bundles, and the aggregate power which these represented gave much spiritual power to the group as a whole.³⁰

Purchase into a male age-grade society or acquisition of a sacred bundle required a great deal of work on the part of a young man's family—

especially the women. However, while the women had to produce or prepare a great deal of worked hides, foods, and other items to be given away or eaten, a boy needed a father and a father's clan to sponsor him. That is why it was a tragedy for a young man who wanted to get ahead in the world to lose his father when he was a child. His mother's lineage would provide him with a great deal of instruction and with the necessities of life, but it was his biological father and men of his father's clan who promoted his advancement in ceremonial life.³¹

For a boy growing up in the upper Missouri village tribes, ceremonial life was the way to spiritual power and economic and political success. Therefore, the boy's grandfather and father would begin encouraging him from about the age of twelve to participate in the age-grade societies on the one hand and, on the other, to begin the process of seeking private spiritual power through fasting and visions. While his father and grandfather would help him into the first age-grade society, by the time he was ready to buy into the second or third he would be married and have at least one wife to help him.³²

A major source of supernatural power for men came through their wives' participation in ritual sexual ceremonies with older, more powerful men.³³ In both the buffalo calling ceremonies and in the age-grade purchase rites the young men gave their wives to the older men who had proved themselves in hunting and war. After this ritual intercourse with the older men, the women returned to their husbands with some of the power of the older men. This act was known as "walking with the buffalo."

The Hidatsa Wolf Chief told of giving "the walking ceremony" when he was nineteen years old. He had only one wife, a very young Mandan girl whom he hesitated to ask to "walk" with his ceremonial father. When he consulted his biological father, Small Ankles suggested that they approach the girl's mother, who told her daughter that participating in the ceremony would make Wolf Chief a better husband and the marriage bond would be strengthened. The young wife's brother stressed the spiritual advantage to her by saying, "It is a great thing for it is hard to do. If he puts you in the ceremonies that way, it will be better for you since it is like giving you for the gods to care for."³⁴ For two of the four nights of the ceremony the Mandan wife "walked" with the buffalo but then she ran away and hid. Wolf Chief went to his clan brother Knife, who responded, "All the women married to us Prairie Chickens [a clan] are eligible to go with you and help you out. You can use my wife for the next two nights."³⁵ That is what Wolf Chief did. It is clear that the wife

and her family saw her participation in the ritual as difficult but important for her supernatural protection and for the good of her family. If, as in this case, she could not continue through the whole ceremony, she could be helped by a clan brother's wife.³⁶

The women who engaged in ritual sex believed that when they gave themselves to the old men, they were literally having intercourse with the buffalo. They considered the buffalo to be a sacred god, for had it not been ordained since the beginning of time that a buffalo skull must be part of every sacred ritual? Therefore, when the God Buffalo had been placated by the woman, he would send herds near the villages for the husband hunter and promise the husband warrior success in combat.

Moreover, when the woman returned to her spouse, the semen from the powerful, elderly man passed to her young husband through her. She was the conduit of that power. When interviewed, village women agreed that they "walked with the buffalo" to ensure good health, enough food and clothing, and a good home for their families as well as a loyal husband who would be successful in war and the hunt. A woman also brought power to her husband through handling sacred objects. During the calling ceremony, a man representing the buffalo would hold out his sacred bundle to a woman. She would place her arms on the "holy man," drag them down to the hand holding the sacred bundle, and take it from him, clasping it to her naked breast. By this act she transferred to her own body the supernatural powers of the man and his bundle. These she passed on to her husband as they lived and worked together.³⁷

Another means of obtaining supernatural power was through kindness to the elderly. Hunters in their prime shared their kill with old people who had no one to provide for them. Usually this problem was handled within the family or clan, but any old person could place himself or herself outside the village when hunters were due back and would receive a share of the meat.³⁸ A man seeking leadership and prestige within his village might even impoverish his own family to give generously to others, for generosity was a virtue that brought not only supernatural power to one who displayed it (thereby showing that he valued supernatural possessions over material wealth) but also gained him credit among his fellow villagers when leaders were chosen. Family and clan members made a point of supplying such a man's family with necessities until they could rebuild their stocks.³⁹

Sacred bundles, fasting and self-mutilation (or suffering before the gods), age-grade societies, "walking with the buffalo," and acts of generosity provided the village Indians with a concrete means of acknowledg-

ing their origins, giving thanks for the sources of their sustenance, and assuring themselves that these sources would continue to exist. Through the processes by which men and women acquired supernatural power to meet the exigencies of life, they also created a social structure and a way of ordering their experiences. These customs helped them to work out the transfer of power from one generation to the next, and to accept and deal with the progression of life through all its stages, from birth through childhood, adulthood, old age, and eventually death.

Nothing seemed stranger to contemporary observers of the village tribes than the religious practices surrounding death. The people painted their beloved dead, wrapped them in carefully prepared hides, and placed them on scaffolds out on the prairie. When the flesh had decayed, they buried the bleached bones—except for the skulls, which they arranged in sacred circles.⁴⁰ These circles became places of worship where the people built shrines and offered sacrifices to Woman Above and her brother Sun, who, unlike the benevolent Holy Women, were vindictive and jealous and had to be propitiated. The familiar sight of red cloths tied to tall poles near these sacred shrines indicated that women were appeasing these vengeful deities so that they would not blow their hot, dry winds over the crops or lure people to battle and death. Woman Above and Sun were thought to be cannibals who devoured the flesh of dead animals and of victims of war, and who, in fact, also ate the flesh of the dead on the scaffolds.⁴¹ At the shrines near the skull circles people fasted, women prayed for men away on war expeditions, and mourners made offerings of flesh or fingers to Sun after a death.⁴²

In 1833, Catlin watched the sun rise from the top of a Mandan lodge and beheld on the “boundless, treeless, bushless prairie” a hundred scaffolds on which the Mandan dead “lived.”⁴³ He noted that when the scaffolds decayed and fell to the ground, the nearest relations buried the rest of the bones but took the skulls, bleached and purified, to circles on the prairie. More than a hundred skulls were placed eight or nine inches apart, where they were protected year after year as objects of loving veneration. Catlin reported several of these “Golgothas,” circles twenty or thirty feet in diameter. In the center of each ring there was a mound about three feet high on which rested one male and one female buffalo skull. In the center of the mound stood a sacred pole about twenty feet high which held “curious articles of mystery and superstition.”⁴⁴ These objects guarded and protected the sacred circle. Each skull rested upon a bunch of wild sage. When the sage disintegrated, a woman in the family replaced it with some that was fresh.

Catlin remarked that a woman always *knew* the skull of her husband or child and visited it daily with a bowl of food. He saw women go there on pleasant days to converse with their dead in the “most endearing language,” and “seemingly getting an answer back.” The woman might bring her work and talk with the skull of her child as she embroidered a pair of moccasins. Then she might fall asleep with her arms circled around it. Catlin reported that he had seen fathers, mothers, wives, and children prostrate under the scaffolds, sending forth “incessantly the most piteous and heart-broken cries and lamentations . . . tearing their hair—cutting their flesh, and doing penance to appease the spirits of the dead.”⁴⁵

Boller, who came twenty years after Catlin, sought relief from the heat one night by crawling to the roof of a lodge toward dawn and wrote, “Soon a faint reddish streak became visible in the east . . . and long rays of light shot upwards. Hazy and indistinct, the outlines of the village appeared, and gleams of rosy light illumined the scaffolds supporting the bodies of those now sleeping the everlasting sleep.”⁴⁶ Boller saw a woman wailing over the body of her husband; “the sound,” he wrote, was “mournful as if her heart was broken with grief that could not be comforted.”⁴⁷ The woman’s husband had been killed by the Sioux in a battle more than a year before but she was still grieving. Boller said her eyes were tearless, and “when she had cried long enough, she would return to her lodge to enter any domestic occupation or amusement going on. If there were a dance in the village, she would rub a little vermilion on her cheeks and join in the reveling.” Boller could only repeat what he saw. Whether the woman was genuinely mourning or merely performing the required ritual was beyond his ken and is well beyond ours. However, when the Indians “cried to the spirits,” they were not weeping. They were sincerely and fervently addressing their guardians in the spirit world, in whom their belief was implicit.⁴⁸

The intimate relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds within the village tribes is best illustrated by the Mandan Okipa ceremony, in which most of the tribe’s rich and varied mythology, legends, and rituals were brought together and enacted. It became to white observers a hallmark of village culture because it was so dramatic and seemed to them so barbarous. In fact, the four-day ceremony, in which the people reflected on their past and sought spiritual renewal, illustrates how mythology functioned as a cohesive element within the village tribes.⁴⁹ Given at least once a year in the summer, it was a sacred feast to tribal bundles, intended to bring buffalo herds near the village. But more

importantly, it was designed to teach the history of the tribe and to tell again tribal myths and legends. It gave young men an opportunity to gain supernatural power, and it was meant "to bring all the gods back so that all the holy things would be working for the Mandan and not for their enemies."⁵⁰

Specifically, the Okipa was thought to serve the practical function of assuring an adequate supply of meat, hides, and other buffalo by-products, but it also emphasized the relationship between the supernatural forces and the daily life of the people. The man who gave it acquired great spiritual power for himself, his family, his clan, and all who assisted him in the ceremonies; young men who fasted and suffered grew in spiritual strength and gained respect from the community.⁵¹ Every person from the smallest child to the oldest man or woman lived again the story of their tribe and how the supernatural powers had led them to the Missouri. In accomplishing all these aims, the four-day ceremony also called down the benevolent attention of "all the holy beings," and drew the people together as they relived their past and reaffirmed their faith.⁵²

The Okipa was first described by George Catlin, who saw it in the company of fur trader James Kipp in the summer of 1832. He began his description of it with these words: "Thank God, it is over, that I have seen it, and am able to tell the world."⁵³ Even though the artist produced the sketches he had made and corroboration from Kipp, an incredulous public refused to believe his account. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft at the Smithsonian would not credit Catlin's report until he received a letter from Kipp in 1872 confirming every detail.⁵⁴

What Catlin saw was the blood flowing as the elders cut the skin on the backs and chests of young men and pulled the skin from the flesh in order to insert the wooden skewers to which thongs would be fastened. What Catlin saw was warriors hanging from poles to which the thongs had been fastened in a voluntary crucifixion that can never be fully realized through mere spoken or written words. What Catlin saw was the skin of young men's legs cut so that skewers could be inserted and fastened to thongs which were attached to heavy buffalo skulls. The young men dragged these symbolic burdens through the village until they collapsed.⁵⁵

Catlin was there. He watched with horror and revulsion as his hand and pen sought desperately to catch the unbelievable scenes that were taking place before his eyes. He saw the agony of the participants, the wildly colorful costumes of the dancers, the unfamiliar harmonies and rhythms of the music and dancing. During the Okipa, several events were

sometimes occurring at one time and Catlin tried to capture it all. He had no time to look behind the drama to the significance of what went on.

Since Maximilian visited the Mandan in the winter, he never witnessed an Okipa; he sat in his room at Fort Clark talking with the chiefs who had given the ceremony and who had learned the mythology and traditions that it expressed. It was easier for him to give a lucid, logical explanation of what took place each day and of what meaning lay behind each event than it was for Catlin, who actually experienced the event.⁵⁶ To understand this ceremony, which was, according to Bowers, the most complicated and colorful performed in the Northern Plains, it is necessary to combine what Catlin saw and what Maximilian heard with the reminiscences of living Mandan who told Bowers what they recalled, as well as with Bowers's interpretation of it all.

The Okipa ceremony began in the evening. First the Okipa Maker brought into the ceremonial lodge all the paraphernalia required; then the men who planned to fast entered (each carried a buffalo head for his pillow and sage brush for his bed) and arranged themselves around the walls according to their moiety. Three drummers, two rattlers, the Bull Dancers, and the man playing the part of Lone Man took their places. To begin the formalities Lone Man made a ritual transfer of his pipe to the Okipa Maker for the duration of the ceremony; then he called Hoita to supervise the performance of the opening dance. Hoita, a minor mythological figure (also known as Speckled Eagle), had according to legend once imprisoned all living things in a place called Dog Den Butte. Since the Okipa lodge represented Dog Den Butte, Hoita was in charge of supervising the dance. Although unimportant otherwise, he ranked equally in importance with Lone Man during the Okipa ceremony.⁵⁷

The first full day of the Okipa ceremony began at daybreak. The fasters appeared dressed in buffalo robes. Drummers announced the Okipa Maker, who came out of the lodge and walked to the plank enclosure which surrounded the Sacred Cedar to pray that Lone Man would hear him and send his people all they asked for. Prayers and dancing went on all day. Small boys and some young men left the Okipa lodge that night after fasting one day, but thirty to fifty of the older fasters remained. That first day concluded the "Opening Exercises."

On the second day the Okipa Maker came out again to pray at the Sacred Cedar for the coming of the buffalo and for good luck for the village. Other participants spent the day preparing for the dramatizations which would take place the next day. The third day was known as "Ev-

everything Comes Back Day." On that day the participants sang and danced and performed dramatizations of the history of the tribe before the entire village. Fasters began to present themselves to suffer before the gods. Young men hung suspended from a pole near the Sacred Cedar as long as it took to perform one dance. Inside the Okipa lodge others were hanging from poles until they lost consciousness or until older members of their clan decided to cut them down.

The fourth day was the hunting day in which ceremonies were performed involving the calling of the buffalo from the four directions and through the four seasons of the year. The young men continued to drag the huge buffalo skulls around the Sacred Cedar until they collapsed. When the last fester fell to the ground, all went into the Okipa lodge where the people of one moiety rubbed their wounds with buffalo marrow and those of the other with ground yellow corn.⁵⁸

When the ceremony was over, the leader who had played the role of Lone Man carried all the cutting tools used in the ceremony to the Missouri River and threw them (along with a few robes and seven corn balls) into the water as an offering to Grandfather Snake. Then all the officers, with their paraphernalia, took part in a cleansing sweat ceremony. The goods collected went to participating officials and to the man whom the Okipa Maker had chosen from his father's clan to help him prepare himself to give the ceremony. He and the fasters made medicine bundles according to their instructions from the supernatural beings who had appeared in the ceremony. Each participant received "a section of a sandbar willow" to put in his personal medicine bundle.⁵⁹

Women had few duties during the ceremony itself. At the close of the first day, they brought willow firewood to the door of the Okipa lodge where the men picked it up, since the women were not allowed inside. On the second day they prepared a midday meal for the Bull Dancers who were not fasting. The Bulls carried food to Hoita, Lone Man, and the rattlers who took part in the ceremonies but did not fast. The Okipa Maker and fasters could neither eat nor drink, even water. On the third day the women prepared the midday meal again. This was the day when Lone Man, with his pipe, and Foolish One, with his staff, were battling to prevent the latter from bringing ill fortune and death to the village. Late in the afternoon the women joined in the ceremony by rushing at Foolish One as he tried to enter the Okipa lodge, breaking his staff, and chasing him through the woods to the river as they pelted him with "rocks, dirt, and pieces of wood." Thus pursued by the women, Foolish One left the village and was no longer a threat to its welfare. The cap

and necklace worn by the man who played the role were tied in a buffalo calf hide to resemble a doll and lashed to a pole in front of the Okipa lodge as an offering to Foolish One who lived in the Sun, a malignant power.⁶⁰

It took a great deal of courage and determination to be an Okipa Maker. The man must have proved his mettle by suffering in previous ceremonies. He had to know the traditions and mythology and organize the activities which would represent them. Most importantly, however, he had to have an enormous amount of property. While he was receiving instruction in the myths and rituals, the Okipa Maker had to provide feasts for those who taught him. In order to pay all the men who took part in the ceremony, he was expected to provide at least one hundred articles including robes, elkskin dresses, dress goods, shirts with porcupine or bead work, men's leggings, and knives. Most of these items had to be made or gathered by the Okipa Maker's wives. As soon as a man received permission to perform the ceremony, usually a year in advance, the women began their preparations. They recruited the women of their lodge and clans, and of their age-grade societies.

In addition to what his wives and their associates could provide, the Okipa Maker's mothers, sisters, and the women of his own and his father's clans were urged to assist. If necessary, he gave a feast to which all members of his clan came. Speeches were made extolling clan loyalty and reminding everyone how the young man was bringing honor to his clan by giving the Okipa. Each speech ended with a plea for goods which could be used for the ceremony. Since each family felt that it benefited by the summer Okipa ceremony, when the Okipa Maker placed his pipe at the door of a lodge where people of his clan lived, the women brought out their contributions.⁶¹

Although the women played an inconspicuous public role in this important ceremony, they were the economic mainstay which made the whole thing possible. No man could win the signal honor for himself of giving the Okipa without the wholehearted support and assistance of the women of his own and his wives' clans. Without their efforts there could be no Okipa. Catlin, Maximilian, and other male observers, however, made no mention of the women's participation; they saw only the surface activities and failed to note that the work of the women was the indispensable platform on which the drama took place.

The man who gave the ceremony offered the people of his village an opportunity to share their heritage and reinforce their beliefs about themselves and their relationship with nature and the supernatural. The

women who helped him did so willingly because they knew how important his work was to the welfare of their society. Through beliefs such as these, and the ceremonies which kept them alive, the people of the village tribes had created a tight-knit society in which every individual had a secure place. From the day of their naming, women and men belonged to a lodge, a clan, and a moiety which gave them their place in the community.⁶²

From earliest childhood, girls and boys were taught their respective roles and duties so that there was never a question of how they should conduct themselves in daily life. This brought an enormous amount of security to the individual and strength to the community, but as Wolf Chief pointed out, it gave little leeway for independent thought or activity. In looking back over his youth, he remarked to Bowers, "I often think how important it was in the olden days to do the same as the others did and there was no way to get out of it. We fasted and we went to war because our fathers did. The fathers took their sons' wives in the ceremonies. It was like a deep trail; one had to follow the same path the others before had made and deepened."⁶³

Placing the good of the group above the individual, however, was what allowed the village tribes to survive in the face of severe external pressures. As the people followed the deep trail for which they were destined, they had the advantage of growing up in a community that was at one with—because part of—the natural world. They believed that the only true wisdom lived far from mankind out in a great loneliness and could be reached only through suffering. They fasted in solitude because they had learned that privation and suffering open the mind to what is hidden. The visions which came to them from their own most inward depths in their isolation gave them the supernatural power they needed to face their responsibilities. Because these visions appeared in the form of familiar animals with whom they had daily contact, they found, when they returned from their vigils, a fundamental accord between their inward and outward lives.⁶⁴ The inner strength which this gave them was a buffer against the constant danger of death and, in working to perform the outward rituals based on the inner visions, the people as a group gathered strength to face the perils around them. Comfortable in their view of the world as well as their experience of it, confident in their supernatural powers and the familiar ways to achieve them, surrounded and supported by families, clans, and age-grade societies, the people survived in a harsh natural environment amid hostile neighbors and in the face of a powerful encroaching nation bent on replacing their culture. Their faith served them well.

6

CLIMBING THE LADDER OF SUCCESS: STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION OF THE VILLAGE TRIBES

The social and ceremonial system imposed so many burdens and obligations on the individual that it was practically impossible to fulfill . . . traditional roles and assume . . . customary positions in the village life except with the assistance of organized groups . . . , chief of which were [the] clan and age-grade societies.

—ALFRED W. BOWERS

The village tribe's religion and mythology were the source of their tribal values, but the framework around which a village organization was built and by which tribal values were instilled was a series of age-grade societies, through which most of the men and women passed.¹ Village age-grade societies were named associations made up of people of the same sex and approximately the same age, dividing the population into a number of organized groups. All of them shared a characteristic pattern of organization. Each had officers distinguished from the rank and file by special paraphernalia, body painting, costumes, and duties. Those chosen had invariably distinguished themselves in some way: men for their bravery, hunting skills, or willingness to assume social and ritual obligations; women for their industry and participation in specific ceremonies.

Each society had a crier who informed the village people of the activities of the society. He might be a member or an old man retired from the

organization but respected for his kindness to members of the group. Each society also had prescribed rites and dances distinguishing it from all others. Each group had regular meetings according to tradition and the men's organizations held special meetings when a member had distinguished himself in battle. Although the men's societies put great emphasis on warfare, they performed other functions as well.² For example, a man giving a feast to an important bundle or performing a sacred ceremony sought help from his age-grade society. Some Arikara societies emphasized assistance to the elderly and, after the epidemic of 1837, to orphans.³

Although the age-grade societies were not in themselves sacred, they had at least two connections with sacred rites. Some societies had ritualistic and conceptual ties. The Stone Hammer society had ties with Grandson, Moon, and Woman Above rites. In addition, each age-grade society was connected to sacred rituals through its members who had rights in various ceremonies. The societies were hierarchical; each age-grade society possessed collectively more supernatural power than the preceding ones, since the members had fasted, or suffered, or given feasts to sacred bundles for a longer time and to a greater extent.

Before war and disease decimated the tribes, each village had its own autonomous societies, but as the number of villages decreased, cooperation between similar societies in different villages developed. Each village had different societies, some of which survived for long periods of time, while others died out. Those with mythological origins were deemed the oldest, and there is evidence to suggest that the Hidatsa acquired several of theirs from the Mandan.⁴

The method of joining a society was similar for the Mandan and Hidatsa. Both followed a pattern of purchase of membership by one group of younger men or women of similar age from another group of older people.⁵ Among the Hidatsa and Mandan, all men and women were theoretically arranged in a series of societies based on age.⁶ While the Arikara also shared the concept that certain responsibilities and advantages accrued to different age groups and had similar societies through which their culture functioned, these were not "arranged in age series nor graded in any other way."⁷ Furthermore, membership in any one of them was on an individual basis rather than by group purchase.

Among the Mandan and Hidatsa, only two groups managed to exist totally outside the age-grade societies: boys and girls under the age of twelve, and old people who had passed through the system and finally sold out of the highest-ranking group.⁸ Not everyone continued through

the entire hierarchy from one society to the other, but those who sought positions of prestige and power or whose families already possessed high status had to follow that path. There was no escape for young people; they had to observe the traditional rituals and join the age-grade societies. It was, as Wolf Chief explained, "like a deep trail; one had to follow the same path the others before had made and deepened."⁹ Although the Arikara had a less rigid method of choosing members, the societies functioned in a similar manner; people joined the first one in their early teens and finally resigned from the last one when considered too old to make a contribution.

While both sexes in the village tribes moved up the age-grade scale, accounts of the men's societies predominate in most of the sources. Because men had more time to give to the ceremonial aspect of their lives than the women did, the men's societies and ceremonies were showier and more numerous than the women's, and drew more attention from outsiders. Furthermore, both contemporary males watching the age-grade rituals and later male anthropologists who studied them were handicapped by their preconceived notions about the two sexes. There *are* descriptions of women's ceremonies in the literature, notably those left by Maximilian, Bradbury, and Boller. Even ethnographic studies of women's groups are in no way as numerous nor as detailed as the accounts of the men's ceremonies. Some anthropologists, such as Robert Lowie, actually relied heavily on their male informants for details of Arikara women's rituals. The most complete picture of the system of age-grade societies, therefore, is the one documenting a man's climb up the age-grade ladder.

The men's age-grade societies were designed to develop responsibility in young males and prepare them to take on community leadership as they became adults. When boys began to grow restless and get into mischief, but were still too young to participate in a hunt or war expedition, they were inducted into their first age-grade society and began their training for the future.¹⁰

Most Mandan boys initially joined the Magpies; Awaxawi Hidatsa first entered the Notched Stick society, while the Hidatsa proper and Awatixa started in the Stone Hammer society. Grandson is said to have founded the latter, using the carved stone hammer designed in mythological times and associated with the Hidatsa Naxpike ceremony, performed to ensure success in hunting and warfare.¹¹ As a member of one of these societies, a boy learned how the higher ones operated and he was initiated into the ceremonial life of his tribe. He also began to assume individ-

ual obligations; he was expected to appear on each ceremonial occasion to fast and make efforts to secure supernatural instruction. During these fasts a boy often had his first vision. If, on the other hand, a young man was not interested in fasting and self-mutilation or refused to undergo such inconvenience and pain, he forfeited the right to be among those who hoped to earn a position of leadership in the village.¹²

A young Mandan male was selected to join his first age-grade society by a member of his father's clan who then became his "father." Usually one such father sponsored several young boys and thus established the first relationship outside his own household for the young man. This "father-son" relationship was formalized through the boy's first purchase into a society and became the basis of his behavior in buying and selling societies for the rest of his life.¹³

When there were at least thirty boys around the age of twelve in a Hidatsa village, older people encouraged them to meet and plan to buy into the society from those who had owned it for a few years. Usually the young men joining the Stone Hammer society went together as a group to fast during the performance of the Naxpike. The boys then purchased the society from a group of older ones who became their "fathers." There was no ceremonial offering of wives to the "fathers" at this time since the boys had not yet married.

Young Hidatsa boys could move in the same manner into the next society, the Crazy Dogs, until they were old enough to go on the war path and return with a victory to their credit. Each step in the hierarchy of the village societies required a purchase with presents provided by members of the boy's family. Thus not every boy joined every age-grade society. A family suffering because a member had led an unsuccessful war party, or one quarreling with another family involved, or one offended for some reason might not sponsor a son, and it was imperative that he have the moral and financial support of his entire family to join a society. The first and second age-grade societies were entered with help from one's household or one's father's clan but after that a young man could not really continue to move forward in the village political arena without the help of one or more wives.¹⁴

Because it was, to a great extent, through the industry of a man's wife or wives that he was able to provide the wealth necessary to meet his obligations, marriage was an important part of social advancement. That is why an ambitious young man had to train for, and participate in, a successful war party in order to prove his manhood; within a few days after returning from such a venture he usually received an offer of mar-

riage from the family of an eligible young woman who had not been married before.¹⁵

Both Mandan and Hidatsa people recognized the importance of marriage between families owning important sacred bundles—or the rights to perform rituals—as important for social cohesion. Families with wealth and important bundles tried to marry their children into one having related or other important bundles. Such a union resulted in a tradition of knowledge as to the proper way to perform complicated rites associated with these bundles on both sides of the marriage. Bowers states that the Mandan managed to preserve most of their rich ceremonialism after the smallpox epidemic of 1837 because of the rigorous training which families gave their children who inherited traditional rights and responsibilities and because of their system of preferred marriage in which parents of both households selected their children's mates.¹⁶

The bulk of Mandan tribal lore was preserved by a few families of high status who tried by selective marriages to keep the bundles and associated ceremonies within their group. A Mandan family holding an important tribal bundle inherited within the clan usually managed to select a son-in-law from the daughter's father's clan. The Mandan believed that a man got along better with a son-in-law of his own clan. For the same reasons, when a man married the oldest daughter of a family, he was given the prerogative of marrying her younger sisters, a factor which further contributed to the retention of inherited rights within the group.¹⁷ Unlike the Mandan and Hidatsa, the Arikara did not seem to place much significance in the intermarriage of bundle-owning families. This factor may have contributed to the greater fragmentation within the tribe after the first smallpox epidemics, and to the inability of the people to deal with the changes that ensued.

Once married, young Mandan and Hidatsa men in their prime joined the Half-Shaved Heads society (until the epidemic of 1837 depleted that category of males so that the organization died out). The men participated in this society until they had distinguished themselves in warfare, ceremonial activities, and fasting. They remained in it until they had shown evidence of the good judgment required to fulfill the social obligations and responsibilities of the Black Mouth society.¹⁸

Membership in the Black Mouth society involved more than a willingness to join. That group had the responsibility for protecting the village if an attack by hostiles was imminent. The Black Mouths also policed the villagers when a group or individual was "calling the buffalo." This was a time when no one could hunt without permission, when women could

not chop wood or light fires which might scare the buffalo away. Anyone found guilty of disobeying these strictures drew severe punishments from the Black Mouths. Whenever a village departed en masse to hunt or to trade, or when a large war party went out, the Black Mouths kept everyone in line with the requirements of the occasion. The men of this society held immense power which was earned through years of proving themselves worthy.¹⁹

After selling out to younger men, the Mandan and Hidatsa Black Mouths bought into the next higher society of Dogs, known by both tribes as "Real Dogs" to distinguish them from other Dog societies. Only men who had shown themselves brave and competent in warfare dared apply. Anyone who had exhibited cowardice in battle or poor judgment in handling police matters was subject to the ridicule of his "joking relatives" if he attempted to buy into the Real Dogs.²⁰

This Dog society was based on the ancient Mandan sacred myth of Grandson, but it also derived from the Hidatsa myth of a beautiful young woman who bore eight yellow dogs, which, after considerable interference in human affairs, went up to the sky to make the dipper.²¹ There were also four other Dog societies: Little Dogs, Crazy Dogs, Dog, and Old Dogs, all of which were bound by common parents and shared numerous common symbols. The Old Dog society was an important one to which leaders and chiefs belonged. They were mature men who had distinguished themselves in many ways. Informants told Bowers that "all the greatest leaders" belonged to it.²² When buying into the Dog society, the Black Mouths offered their wives as they had in other purchases, but members who were selling showed less inclination to avail themselves of the privilege. Older men, who had prayed often for younger men, had depleted the supernatural powers acquired through a lifetime of fasting, bundle purchase, and feasts for older people. They did not always want to share what they had left with a younger man. Only a few sexually active older men, who attributed their ability to supernatural powers, "availed themselves" of the "sons' " wives.²³

The highest age-grade society in the Mandan and Hidatsa series was the Bull society.²⁴ Only those males who had purchased sacred bundles containing buffalo skulls and the right to instruct men in the ceremonial painting of those skulls could become members. This requirement placed a premium on ownership of hereditary and bundle rights rather than on personal bundles based on vision experiences. When the Dog society bought out the Bulls, the "sons" continued to go through the formality

of offering their wives, although the "fathers" rarely availed themselves of the privilege.

The Bulls met and danced in public four times a year, representing the buffalo of the particular season and direction (both Mandan and Hidatsa sacred and origin myths refer to buffalo of the four seasons and four directions). Like the women's White Buffalo society, the men's group accepted members of other age-grade societies as junior members to represent mythical characters associated with the buffalo. Both men's and women's Buffalo societies dramatized the return of the buffalo to the village in a ritual dance that was an old and widespread institution throughout the Plains. The Bull society also included several young girls whose duty it was to "bring water for the buffaloes" when the society met.²⁵ While the Bull society was painting its members in preparation for a public appearance, their announcer went through the village proclaiming, "The buffalo herds are coming to the Missouri. Every one come out and see them drink."²⁶

While the Arikara did not have the same type of age-grade societies as the Mandan and Hidatsa, they did have similar organizations which also served to assist individuals in meeting their obligations and helped to maintain stability within their villages.²⁷ Maximilian noted two Arikara dancing societies, one of which he considered equivalent to the age-grade societies of the Mandan and Hidatsa.²⁸ Other observers listed different societies, but one that was never in doubt was the military-type Soldiers' society which functioned in the same capacity as the Black Mouths. This was the only male Arikara society that seemed identical to those of the Mandan and Hidatsa.²⁹ Edward S. Curtis and Lowie identified the River and Goose societies of the women and a number of men's societies whose existence were supported by an Arikara informant, Bears Teeth.³⁰

Curtis stated that among the Arikara "a man might join any of the men's societies, and he could leave one organization for another, but he could not belong to more than one at the same time." Bears Teeth supported this view. He also made clear the difference between the Arikara and the Mandan age-grade societies. Except for his entrance into the Young Dogs at the age of fifteen, Bears Teeth did not have to ask to join other societies. He was actively recruited. One can surmise that he was a responsible man who could be depended upon to take his duties seriously and who had the financial resources to pay when necessary. It is obvious that the decrease in population due to war and disease was a strong factor in what happened in the Arikara societies, which suggests that Bears Teeth might not have been describing the process as it occurred when the

Arikara were more numerous, powerful, and untouched by white contact. However, as Lowie points out, if the Mandan remembered so well all the details of their ceremonial life, it is unlikely that the Arikara could have forgotten the rules which governed their societies prior to their disasters.³¹

Although the documentation of men's age-grade societies is more complete than that of women's, the nineteenth-century eyewitness accounts of women's activities and the twentieth-century reminiscences of women who still remembered the old ways corroborate each other, and give a clear picture of the significance of the women's societies and ceremonies. The women's societies were geared to three important aspects of village life: to prevent loss of life in warfare and to celebrate martial victories, to ensure good garden crops and to give thanks for the harvest, and finally, to call the buffalo.

The earliest Hidatsa group for girls was the Skunk society, involving dances after war victories. A Hidatsa, Buffalo Bird Woman, told Gilbert L. Wilson that she was one of the oldest girls when she joined it at age fourteen.³² Bowers says that a Mandan girl usually joined her first society at age twelve but he does not name it.³³ The Gun society consisted of a group of girls chosen to perform a ritual dance each summer by young men who "had guns [as Crows Heart had the horse] for their personal medicine."³⁴ Lowie does not think this was a "real" age-grade society, but he admits that the same term was used for the Gun society as for all the other age-grade groups.³⁵

Young married Mandan and Hidatsa women joined the River or Enemy societies.³⁶ Women of both these societies met whenever the men returned from a successful war expedition and they took an important part in the victory parades. They danced the scalp dance and their singers were men of "friendly" societies who held their positions by invitation from the women. Between the ages of thirty and forty, women of both tribes could join the Goose society and—after menopause—the White Buffalo Cow society. Both of these were sacred and carried with membership a great deal of prestige and gifts which gave a woman an opportunity to regain more than the equivalent of the many gifts she had paid on her way up the ladder of societies.

No early travelers made reference to Arikara women's societies but Lowie described their Goose society and the ceremonies members performed.³⁷ Bears Teeth, the Arikara informant, mentioned two Arikara women's societies. According to him the River Snake society had no function except to assist the men's societies; apparently Lowie never

thought to ask some Arikara woman what they considered their mission to be. Like the men's societies, these women gave public performances. For these, they wore their hair loose down their backs, applied red paint from the corner of their eyes to their ears and on their cheeks, and wore dresses of goatskin and a headband of braided grass, wrapped in front with beaded cloth into which five straws and an eagle's feather had been inserted. Before each performance, a crier announced the event. There were four male singers; one held a hand drum, another a gourd rattle and two of them pipes. As the women danced, they moved in a zigzag fashion to simulate snakes. Bears Teeth also described the Arikara Goose society. Like the Mandan and Hidatsa, the Arikara considered this an important and a sacred society, one they used to bless their fields.³⁸

Some older women gained recognition and wealth because they were able to make corn come out of their bodies by supernatural means. Women gained the power to perform this miracle by owning individual rights in certain sacred bundles and by participating in many sacred ceremonies. Bears Teeth swore that he knew an elderly Arikara woman who was much respected because she could make corn seeds come out of her eyes. Members of Mandan and Hidatsa women's societies frequently had supernatural experiences associated with corn rites in which a woman received instructions in a vision to make a feast to the society. Some women bought the rights to have "corn spirits" come up in their throats on special public occasions. When corn appeared out of the mouth of such a woman, those sitting near her gave her presents so that the corn would go back down again. Having shown their ability to perform miracles with corn, these women were highly esteemed and richly rewarded for their efforts. They were honored as life members and allowed to retain their rights in the Goose society while buying into the White Buffalo Cows. Women who could perform corn miracles were present when the younger women met and on all other occasions when bundle owners having supernatural powers over garden crops performed public rites.³⁹ Mandan women holding rights in various Holy Women bundles also met whenever a feast was given. Their rights had been acquired individually by aiding their husbands or brothers in the bundle purchase. They held membership in either the Goose or the White Buffalo Cow society.⁴⁰

Bears Teeth explained that in the beginning the Goose spoke to the Arikara, saying, "I will go to the edge of the big rivers. When it is time for you to prepare something for me to eat, I will return. When I shall have come back, you may proceed with your garden work and you will be sure of success."⁴¹ Thus the geese came in the spring when the sowing

began and left in the fall after the harvest. Bears Teeth claimed that the Arikara had always had the Goose society because they had always had corn. However, Bowers believes that the Goose society originated with the Mandan and that they had it even before they came to the Missouri.⁴² Whatever its origin, the Goose society was of extreme importance to all three village tribes. It met as a group to welcome the waterbirds in the spring. During the summer individuals frequently prepared feasts and asked the women of the Goose society to dance. In times of drouth, the people went to sacred corn bundle owners who invited the society to dance. In fact, the Hidatsa believed all rainmaking rites were undertaken on the initiative of the Goose society.⁴³

The highest women's group was the White Buffalo Cow society, whose principal function was to call the buffalo for the winter hunt. Since the Mandan and Hidatsa believed that menstrual blood drove the buffalo away, only women who had gone through menopause were eligible to join (because menstrual blood was considered good for the gardens, it was not a liability in the Goose society).⁴⁴ The White Buffalo Cow society originated with the Mandan, and was relatively new to the Hidatsa, but Boller observed and recorded a Buffalo Cow society ritual performed by the latter in 1858. The fact that this ceremony was essentially the same as the one Maximilian saw performed by the Mandan twenty-five years earlier and another remembered in the twentieth century by an elderly native attests to the tenacity of this tradition.⁴⁵

When membership in a White Buffalo Cow society began to decrease because of the death of members, women of the Goose society met and formed a temporary society for the purpose of negotiating for the purchase from the older women. All rites took place after harvests had been gathered; since even mentioning the White Buffalo Cow society could bring on cold weather, no one spoke of it or hummed the songs involved in the rites during the growing season lest an early frost destroy their crops. The actual sale took place in the late fall after the village had moved into winter camp.

When a sale price had been agreed upon and a date for beginning the instruction determined, each older woman selected from one to four women among the buyers whom she called "daughter." The women built a sweat lodge frame which was covered by six robes provided by the buyers. Each buyer gave a wooden bowl and robes to the woman from whom she received instructions and paraphernalia. The buyers selected one of their group to take the white robe and to occupy the leading posi-

tion during the dances. She had been chosen because her husband had an important role in other buffalo-calling rites.

For the ceremony transferring ownership of the society, the group chose a girl aged two to nine to represent the buffalo calf of the origin myth. She stood in the center of the line during the dance with the hair side of her tiny robe turned out. A woman known as Summer Buffalo stood at the end of the line. Another woman stood next to the child and attended to the incense as waiter for the group. All other members also wore robes with the skin side out. The special officers either possessed buffalo bundles in their own right or were married to men with such rights. The child was also chosen from a household possessing buffalo-calling rights.

Male singers for the Mandan White Buffalo Cow society possessed ceremonial rights in the Okipa; the Hidatsa chose men who owned other buffalo ceremonies. Since the men held their positions in both the Goose and White Buffalo Cow societies by virtue of their rights in other ceremonies, the sale of the society from one group of women to another did not affect the position of the men. Songs, paraphernalia, and rites differed slightly between the two tribes for the Goose but were identical for the White Buffalo Cow society. At one time the men's Bull society had met with the White Buffalo Cow society, but the men's group died out in the later years. The Black Mouths met with the women, however, because it was their duty to organize the village for fasting when the days were shortest to bring the buffalo herds to the river bottoms near the village.⁴⁶

Women who were members of the White Buffalo Cow society enjoyed the respect and admiration of the entire village. In fact, older people in general, so long as they were not too feeble to get around, performed important roles in ceremonies. Women who had assisted at childbirth became doctors after the menopause and could substitute for men in a great many societies.⁴⁷ In many ceremonies they were the medium through which the traditions and bundles were transmitted to a legitimate male heir.⁴⁸

Mrs. Good Bear, a Mandan, recalled how her grandmother, Coyote Woman, and mother, Stays Yellow, earned the right to act as doctors. Her grandmother had a supernatural experience in which a large bear came to her in a dream and said, "You are having a hard time. From now on, you must go among your people doctoring. People will give you white buffalo robes, leggings, dresses, and moccasins, for you will cure all who ask your help."⁴⁹ From that time on Coyote Woman practiced as a doctor. The Mandan believed that the bear was the greatest of all

doctors. Stays Yellow acquired the right to practice from her mother and passed it on to Mrs. Good Bear. The bundle which Mrs. Good Bear received consisted of black root, sage, and the sacred song. She only doctored one woman in childbirth but she earned "a fat steer" when the child was born.⁵⁰

One of the rewards of membership in age-grade societies was the network of support provided by a woman's group "sisters," "mothers," and "daughters" all through her life. As village women grew up, married, bore their children, worked their fields, called the buffalo and prepared for the hunt, helped their husbands and brothers with their social duties, buried and tended their dead, and eventually became doctors and learned old women, they always had each other to lean on. They had their age-grade society sisters and their biological sisters to go through each stage of life with them (furthermore, because it was customary for a man to marry several sisters at once, biological sisters often shared a marriage bond). They had their group mothers and their clan mothers to guide them through new experiences. And because their society was based on matrilineal residence and matrilineal inheritance, women usually lived their whole lives with their biological mothers and grandmothers. In turn, as they grew older, they had their own daughters and many age-grade society daughters and clan daughters to whom they could pass on their acquired knowledge. Because men spent much of their time with other men in hunting and war expeditions, suffering together before the gods, or performing other ceremonies, the companionship and support that women provided for each other were doubtless highly valued.

But the age-grade society system had other rewards for women as well, for it provided prestige and financial gain. Even young girls received presents for dancing to celebrate war victories. The mature women reaped the greatest rewards, however; they were paid well for their work in the Goose and White Buffalo Cow societies because their efforts ensured ample food for their families and the village. Each participation brought the women more prestige and respect as well as valuable gifts.⁵¹ Their activities in behalf of their brothers' and husbands' ceremonial and age-grade society activities brought honor to their clans, lodges, and immediate families as well.⁵²

In fact, the evidence indicates that a woman who participated wholeheartedly in the ceremonial functions to which she was entitled and in the climb up the ladder of age-grade societies accumulated respect, financial rewards, and privileges along the way, just as a man did. These were increased by age as women past menopause became entitled to perform

healing and ceremonial activities. The social status into which a woman was born definitely affected her opportunities for leadership, but like her male counterpart, she had to earn each new prerogative by dedication and work. Although contemporary white male observers failed to notice it, the village Indians' age-grade system offered social advancement to women as well as to men.

Leadership within the village tribes was hard-earned by both women and men, but it tended to remain from generation to generation in the hands of a few families owning sacred bundles and ceremonial rights. What prevented this privilege from becoming tyranny was that ownership of these sacred bundles could be maintained only by great effort on the part of the people involved. A man went through the age-grade societies, fasted and suffered, gave feasts for sacred bundles, proved himself generous to all and kind to the old in order to reach an important rank in the village, but even so he could never aspire to a lifelong position of absolute authority. However, it was men of these leading families who welcomed white visitors, and since the Indians carried about them all the panoply of power, it never occurred to their guests to question their male supremacy. Catlin recognized that among the Mandan, "as with the enlightened world," there were "different grades of society," but neither he nor any other white traveler, coming as they did from male-dominated societies, thought to include the women in their analysis of the village tribes' political hierarchy.⁵³

Europeans and Americans were always looking for *the* chief in a tribe with whom they could do business, but the Mandan and Hidatsa used the term "chief" to mean anyone who, by virtue of authority at any particular moment, was recognized as leader of a group of people.⁵⁴ According to Bowers's informants, Hidatsa villages had no tribal council until after the epidemic of the 1780s because these communities were scattered and had little contact. Hence there was no tribal chief, but the villages banded together into a council which spoke for all three Hidatsa groups and joined in mutual defense against common enemies. The Mandan and the Hidatsa apparently defended each other's villages if attacked and one did not enter into a peace treaty without including the other. The diffusion of age-grade societies throughout the villages strengthened ties within each tribe and the establishment of common societies between the Mandan and Hidatsa contributed to their relationship of mutual support. The men on the tribal councils were selected from village leaders and were, no doubt, leaders in age-grade societies and religious ceremonies.⁵⁵

Just as there was no tribal chief, there was not even a single village chief, for in any given year there would be a peace chief, a war chief, a chief in charge of the summer hunt, and a special chief who had the final authority to choose the site and make decisions for the winter camp. Most leadership positions were more or less temporary, serving for one occasion (war party) or a season (winter camp chief). Leaders were chosen by the council and several men were considered until the group found one who was accepted by unanimous agreement. There was no question among the Mandan and Hidatsa of two powerful men fighting for the position until the strongest won. If there was a difference of opinion, it was negotiated and the will of the majority prevailed. A minority group rarely held out against a majority vote because it was believed that when people quarreled over the choice of a leader, bad luck was sure to follow.

The qualities sought for in a leader were the ability to rule by consensus, a good military record, interest in public affairs, participation in tribal rites, generosity and kindness to the old, good judgment and personality. It is easy to see how the search for supernatural power and the climb up the ladder of age-grade societies taught those very qualities to the men who persevered.⁵⁶ In fact, Bowers traced the process of weeding out those unfit for leadership through age-grade societies. He found that not everyone wished to join the Stone Hammers because members were obligated to appear at every ceremonial occasion, fast with groups involved, and make efforts to secure supernatural instructions. Those who were indifferent to instructions to seek visions or did not wish to "suffer for the gods" did not join the group.⁵⁷

Bowers examined an incident related by Wolf Chief in which a participant in the Naxpike ceremony had been unable to endure the ordeal of suffering and he determined that the man had eliminated himself as a war leader by displaying fear and pain, even though he had seen a vision.⁵⁸ Bowers concludes that "those who lost status as a result of indifference to ritual responsibilities, evidence of cowardice or laziness, and unwillingness to assist their kinsmen in social and ceremonial activities, were weeded out of the age grade societies, leaving only those who conformed to the highest traditional standards."⁵⁹ It appears that this method developed several men within a village who were qualified to take leadership, and tradition provided many opportunities for each one to exercise it.

A different leader was chosen each year for the winter camp but the summer chief could hold his position as long as he maintained the good will and respect of the village. If dissatisfaction occurred, a tactful chief

invited to his lodge those who opposed him and attempted to correct the difficulty. He showed good will and generosity towards those who were dissatisfied. If this failed, he suggested that someone else take over his work. If displaced, he continued to be active on the council. When he grew old, he relinquished his position to a younger man who had passed the Black Mouth society age. No chief could rule despotically or alone, for harmony was the ideal and a man who could not keep his village operating by consensus was soon replaced.⁶⁰

Visitors to the Arikara villages reported a great deal of dissension within them because after the epidemics when the population decreased, many chiefs without a village or following were moved into one place where they refused to relinquish their authority. Hence the Arikara differed somewhat from the Mandan and Hidatsa in their concept of leadership, as they did in many other ways.⁶¹ On the other hand, the experiences of Bears Teeth indicate that the same process of seeking out those who were industrious, generous, and concerned with the good of the people prevailed among the Arikara as well.

The emphasis on rule by consensus, the high regard for generosity and care for the helpless, and the diffusion of power through temporary "chiefs" in many areas of village life all prevented the kind of absolute power in the hands of one person that often prevails where men are in complete control of the public affairs of a society. Yet white observers assumed that men *were* in complete control, partly because this concept fit their preconceived notions of leadership, and partly because the flamboyant nature of much of the male Indians' activities magnified their importance. Village men hunted buffalo, fought off enemies, fasted, and participated in elaborate dances and rituals, often involving dramatic acts of self-mutilation. For ceremonial occasions, they painted themselves and decorated their intricate coiffures and their robes with feathers and other ornaments. All of these things called attention to the men, and gave outsiders the impression that men's activities were of chief importance. And indeed, their responsibilities—as hunters, warriors, and ceremonial leaders, who through their rituals ensured the people's place in the supernatural world—were very important.

But *women's* responsibilities were absolutely crucial, for they provided the practical support for *all* aspects of village life. Women prepared the supplies that were necessary for the hunting parties; they processed the slain buffalo into usable products and food; they conducted their own ceremonies, aided the men in the performance of their rituals, and provided the necessary assistance for the men's advancement in society;

they gave birth to the next generation and tended to the last when it died; they controlled all of the tribe's land and material goods, and made the attainment of those goods possible through their paramount activity, the growing of corn. The corn not only fed the tribes, but, as recognized in the myth of Mother Corn, was essentially the source of all bounty, for it was the surplus of corn and the trade which it generated that made the village Indians' way of life possible.

Because women did not hold titles, such as "chief," associated with leadership by Europeans and Americans, white observers did not recognize village women's preeminence in society. But, in fact, women owned all the land and controlled much of the wealth, performed and organized most of the activities that kept the society going, rose through the ranks of age-grade societies through their progressive achievements, and ultimately attained positions of honor and prestige. Women's accomplishments and authority in all aspects of village life were a fact; those visiting the tribes failed to recognize it because they did not think to ask the right questions.