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# Blackfeet American Indian Women: Builders of the Tribe

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**I Sewing the tipi cover, a** cooperative task that could usually be completed in one day. Photograph by Walter McClintock, courtesy of Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California, Negative No. MCC-436.

House form is not simply the result of physical determinism but a reflection of a number of choices that a group has made about how it wishes to live. This assumption is central to what follows. Consequently, house forms then provide a profusion of information regarding the culture in which the house form is utilized. When regarded in this way, the house is more than shelter; it becomes what Amos Rapoport describes in *House Form and Culture* as “a physical mechanism which reflects and helps create the world view, ethos, and so on, of a people, comparable to the various social institutions (or mechanisms) which do the same.”<sup>1</sup>

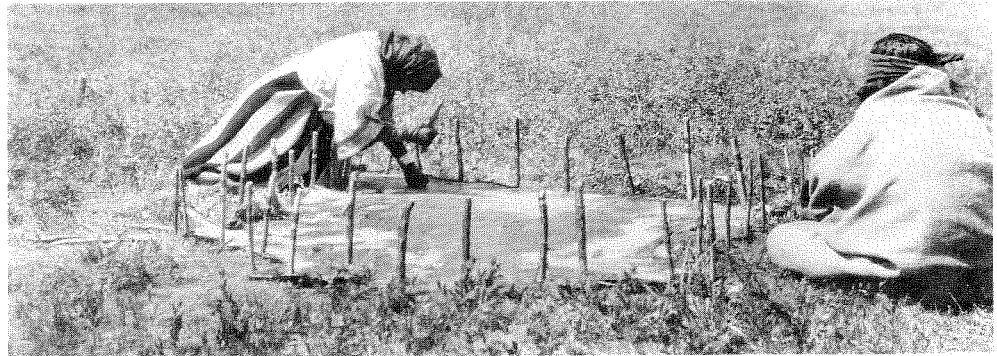
For the Blackfeet American Indians, the built environment provided much more than shelter. The Blackfeet dominated the upper Great Plains north of the Missouri River and east of the Rocky Mountains, an area that is now the state of Montana. They had a nomadic existence and depended on buffalo hunting and foraging for their means of subsistence.<sup>2</sup> The single Blackfoot house type—the tipi—fulfilled its greatest role by serving as a physical representation of the Blackfoot world view.

The Blackfoot dwelling’s function as both an utilitarian and a spiritual entity has become more clear through the recent writings of Native American histor-

ians and autobiographers. The opinions of these historians tend to challenge the theories that were first presented by anthropologists in the 1800s. An area that has been the subject of particular disagreement is the cultural significance of the work involved in constructing and maintaining the house form.<sup>3</sup> The importance of these tasks, which were the sole responsibility of Blackfeet women, was vastly under-rated by nineteenth-century chroniclers.

One such observer was United States Army Captain Benjamin Louis E. de Bonneville, whose adventures in the Rocky Mountains between May 1832 and August 1835 were later related by Washington Irving. Regarding Blackfeet women, Bonneville observed that “the duties of a wife . . . are little less onerous than those of a packhorse.”<sup>4</sup> The anthropologist George Catlin, a contemporary of Bonneville, was rather more blunt in his appraisal. “The Crow women (and Blackfeet also) are not handsome, and I shall at present say but little of them. They are, like all other Indian women, the slaves of their husbands, being obliged to perform all the domestic duties and drudgeries of the tribe.”<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that explorers and adventurers had little regard for domesticity. Furthermore, because

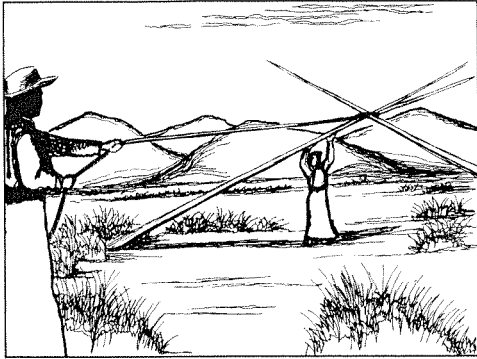


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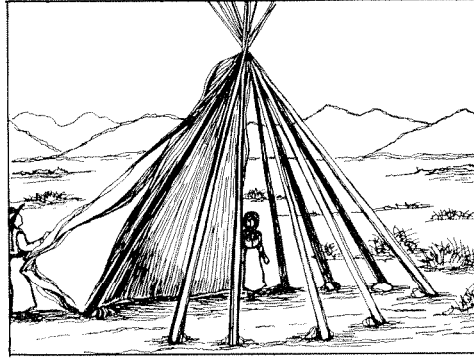


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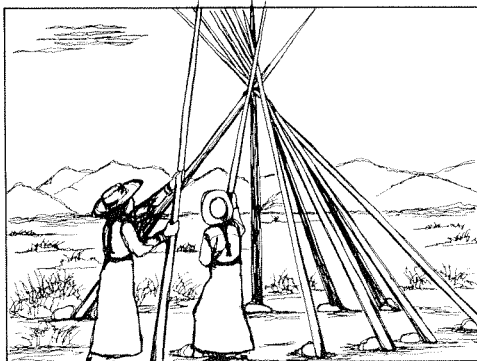
- 2 Preparation of a buffalo hide for use**, an arduous process involving such tasks as scraping. Photograph courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History, Department Library Services, Negative No. 23417.
- 3 Softening the buffalo hide**, another task in the preparation process. Photograph by Walter McClintock, courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California, Negative No. MCC-434.



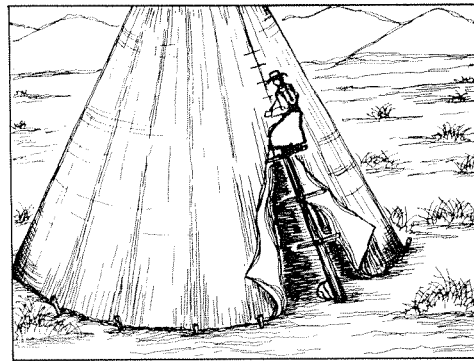
4A



4C



4B



4D

**4 Steps in erecting the tipi:** A, raising the tetrapod base; B, laying the poles in place; C, raising the tipi cover into place; D, pinning up the front of the tipi cover. Drawings by Susan Jane Priestley.

**5 Erecting the tipi on a windy day.** Photograph courtesy of Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries.

they were familiar only with societies in which women were supposed to be subservient, these amateur anthropologists appear to have been unable to perceive the balance of power that existed between genders in the Native American populations. Similarly, they were not cognizant of the essential role that gender-specific tasks played in providing subsistence. For example, the mens' work was done away from camp, and in between grueling hunting and warring expeditions, the men returned to camp primarily to rest. Women, on the other hand, did most of their work in the village, and thus visiting explorers were confronted with the sight of women keeping busy while the men rested. Because this apparent imbalance was not given closer examination, for centuries Native American women have had the reputation of being "unfortunate and debased . . . beasts of burden."<sup>6</sup>

Early anthropologists erroneously concluded that women had low status within the tribe due to the nature of their daily tasks. As anthropologist John C. Ewers declared in *Probing the American West*, "the Indian country of the Upper Missouri was a man's world. As homemakers and housekeepers, women performed scores of tasks necessary to the welfare of their families. But their role was a humble one."<sup>7</sup>

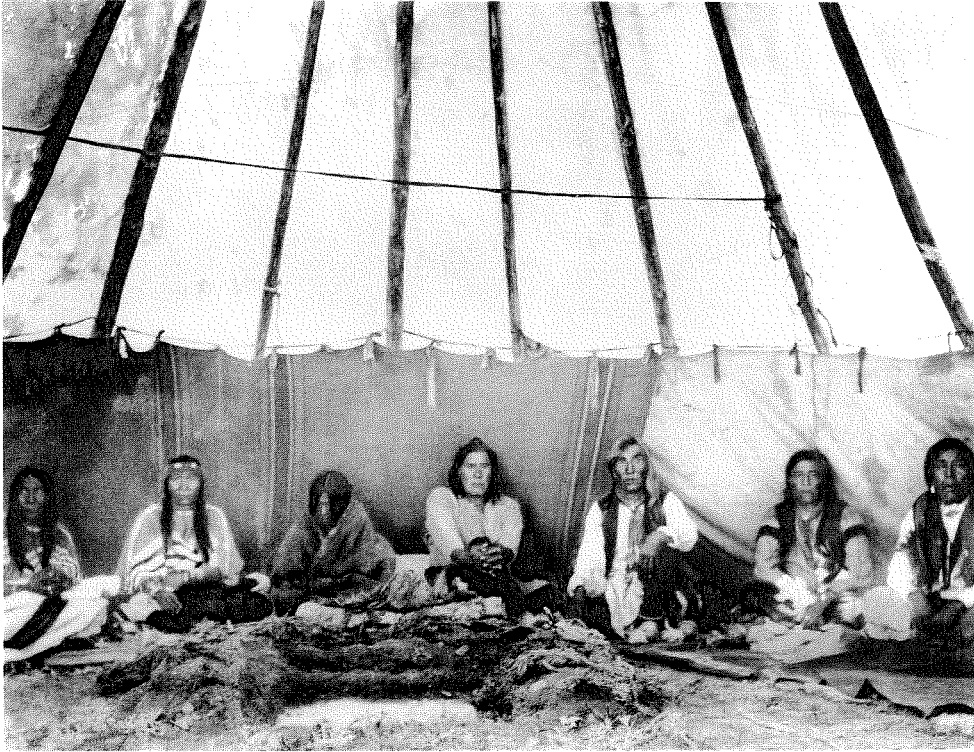
A major component of the women's domestic role was the fabrication of the tipi. The once plentiful buffalo provided the skins used for this purpose. When a woman had sufficient hides prepared and was ready for a new tipi (usually about once a year), she invited close friends to join her for a specially prepared feast. Acceptance of this invitation signaled a willingness to assist in the construction process. For the most part the work was done nonhierarchically, although an older, more experienced woman might supervise the intricate phases of construction. Because the fabrication of the tipi was a cooperative task, it could usually be completed in one day.

In the sign language of the Plains Indians, work is indicated by a hide-scraping motion, which bears witness to the extensive effort required to prepare a skin for use. Each buffalo hide took two full days of work to prepare,<sup>8</sup> but since some parts of the process, such as drying the hide in the sun, took place over a period of days, the preparation time was actually much longer. A woman of average skill might be able to tan as many as twenty-five hides in a season, but it was unlikely that even a highly skilled woman could complete more than thirty hides in a season.<sup>9</sup>

It is crucial to note that these efforts did not go unrewarded. Women who excelled at skin



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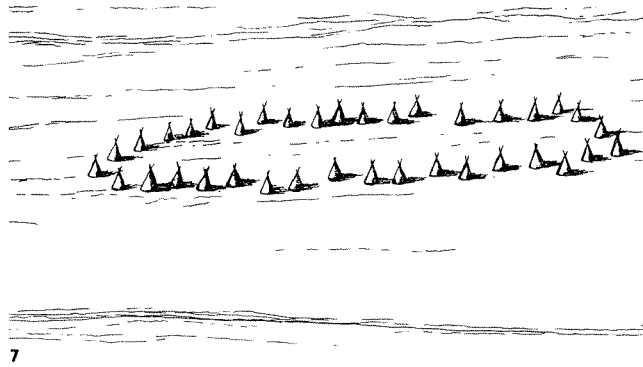
**6 Location of the dew cloth in the tipi's interior.** Photograph by Walter McClintock, courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California, Negative No. MCC-238.

dressing were respected for both the quantity and the quality of their work. Ewers reports that older women “spoke with pride of the number of skin lodges they had made, much as the successful warrior boasted of his deeds of valor.”<sup>10</sup> This parallel pride of achievement is consistent with the Native American sense of balance and interdependence between males and females. In the case of the Blackfeet, the women depended on the men to hunt the buffalo while the men depended on the women to transform the buffalo hides into adequate shelters.

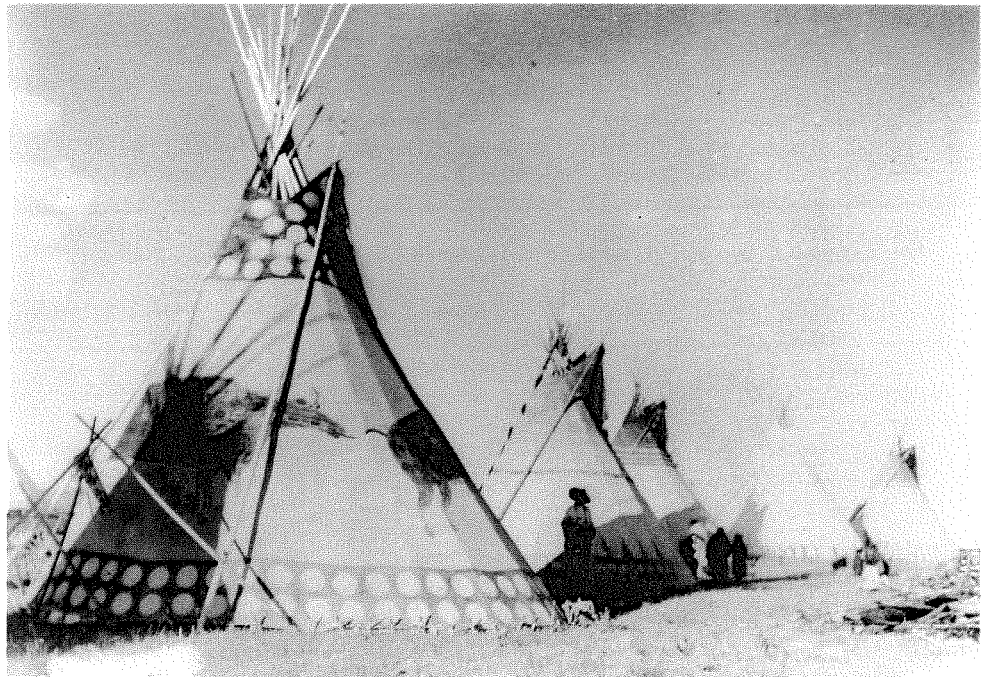
The buffalo hide cover, placed over a framework of twenty wooden poles, provided a dwelling that was extremely well suited to a nomadic lifestyle. The first step in erecting the tipi was to lash four of the poles together at their tips and erect them as a unit, creating a tetrapod base on which to lean other poles. Great care was taken to arrange these poles so that the tipi cover would hang properly and conform to traditional standards for appearance. Once the poles were in place, the fan-shaped tipi cover was raised, wrapped around the frame, and then pinned together using twelve-inch long wooden dowels. Erecting a tipi was a potentially cumbersome task, due to the nature of the materials: the tipi cover weighed close to one hundred pounds and the wooden poles were eighteen

to twenty feet long. Nevertheless, this task could be accomplished by one or two women. In fact, Blackfoot scholar Walter McClintock reports that “the Blackfeet women were so expert that it took them only a few minutes.”<sup>11</sup> Even in heavy winds, it rarely took them more than ten or fifteen minutes to erect the tipi.<sup>12</sup>

While the tipi remained a relatively simple structure, minor refinements in the design were important in protecting the inhabitants from the harsh weather of the northern plains. For example, an interior lining called a dew cloth was hung by ropes tied to the tipi poles. Hanging down about five feet, the dew cloth was long enough to be weighted down on the bottom with the numerous pouches that filled the tipi. In addition to preventing rain from dripping off the poles and into the tipi, the air space between the dew cloth and the tipi cover provided insulation, keeping the tipi warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Ventilation was also increased because warm air rising in the tipi brought in cold air from outside, which came in under the tipi cover and rose between the dew cloth and the tipi cover. The movement of this air created an excellent draft for removing smoke from the tipi’s central fire.<sup>13</sup> In cold weather, sod or snow was packed around the bottom exterior edge of the tipi to prevent



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**7 The circular form of the tipi encampment.** Drawing by Susan Jane Priestley.

**8 The tipi encampment provided an experiential embrace.** Photograph by Walter McClintock, courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California, Negative No. MCC-238.

excessive drafts. In hotter weather, the dew cloth and the bottom edge of the tipi could be unstaked and rolled up about a foot to increase ventilation.

An average tipi was fourteen to sixteen feet in diameter and stood seventeen feet tall.<sup>14</sup> A tipi of this size required twelve to fourteen buffalo hides for its fabrication and typically housed a family of eight: a husband, one or more wives, a grown son, and two or three younger children. Because men often did not marry until they were thirty years of age, they continued to live in the lodge of their parents long after reaching adulthood. It also was not uncommon for men to have multiple wives.<sup>15</sup> In order to minimize the potential disorder created by eight people living in a 150- to 200-square-foot area, traditions developed to govern the use of space within the tipi. The primary organizer of space was the central fireplace, which guided traffic in a circle.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, tradition dictated that women sat on the south and men on the north.<sup>17</sup> Because the doorway generally faced the east, this placement in turn regulated that women entered and turned to their left while men entered and turned to their right. In addition, proper etiquette required that someone moving inside the tipi never pass between another person and the fireplace. The greatest error was to pass between the tipi's

sacred altar (located directly opposite the door) and the fireplace.<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis on circular movement within the tipi was not only efficient but reflected the strong spiritual value placed on the circular form in general and the tipi in particular. The circle was considered a sanctified pattern of movement, which was believed to have no beginning and no end. Edward Curtis interprets the Native American belief in this potency: "everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. . . . The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves."<sup>19</sup> The sense of well-being that was associated with this circulation pattern is exemplified by the response to its absence. For older Blackfoot Indians living today, circular movement within the tipi is "a part of the sacred circle that many people associate with this kind of life. . . . [Modern tipis which] do not have a special center or traffic direction can be very disorienting and uncomfortable for those used to the old ways."<sup>20</sup>

The Blackfoot sensitivity to the circular form was reinforced by the spatial characteristics of their natural environment, the open plains. On the prairie, "one can see in all directions a continuous horizon which is more or less level. Points

thus appear equally distant, and there is an impression of living inside a circular field of vision and experience."<sup>21</sup> This perception was reiterated on a more human scale by the circular form of the tipi encampment, which must have formed a welcome sense of enclosure on the broad-reaching prairie.<sup>22</sup> Standing within the encampment, rows of tipis two or three thick embraced a large circle on the prairie and curved into one's peripheral vision, thus experientially embracing the users of this space. Blackfoot Indians expressed this quality through metaphors such as "the sacred hoop of the tribe."<sup>23</sup>

While the circular plan of the tipi encampment provided enclosure on one scale, the circular form of the tipi provided enclosure on a more intimate scale. In addition, the tipi possessed distinctive spatial qualities. Some of these qualities were discussed by Elizabeth Weatherford in an article about common characteristics of preindustrial dwellings built by women. While emphasizing cross-cultural comparisons, her description of dwellings that have "no edges or planes to interrupt the flow of space" is an acute analysis of the Blackfoot tipi.<sup>24</sup> A modern tipi dweller confirmed Weatherford's analysis: "the roundness of our dwelling gives me a very strong feeling—like being inside of a geometric mole-

cule and tumbling through the vastness of the Universe—physical old age next to me, spiritual everlasting age all around: just People, Earth, poles, and tipi covering, with a natural skylight up above and light diffused by the walls all around."<sup>25</sup>

In addition to providing a particular spatial experience, the tipi facilitated a sense of connection between the dwelling and the surrounding environment. One could follow the sun's progression by the light that filtered through the semitranslucent cover, and the scents of the forest were recreated by the smoky fire and the use of incense made from sacred trees. The wildlife of the prairie also existed within the tipi in the form of skin rugs and clothing. Furthermore, the tipi muffled but did not eliminate the noises of the camp. Consequently, even within the enclosure of the tipi, one felt connected to the surrounding community.

Because of the spiritual qualities associated with the circle, all tipis were perceived as sacred objects. The tipis with painted exteriors possessed even greater symbolic significance. These embellishments were not merely decorations put on the tipi at the whim of the owner but indicated that a particular tipi was the point of convergence for especially potent spiritual powers. Although the tipi cover was





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**9 At night the tipis glow like lanterns in the darkness of the prairie.** Photograph by Walter McClintock, courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California, Negative No. MCC-385.

not a sacred entity in itself,<sup>26</sup> it was part of a complex of sacred objects that were believed to represent the Holy Spirits with whom the Blackfeet maintained close contact.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the tipi became both a physical manifestation of faith and a location for ritual prayers. The extent of this achievement is expressed by a Blackfoot Indian's analysis that "the spiritual protection of the [painted] tipi meant much more than its physical protection."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the tipi was not just a shelter from the natural environment, a particular spatial experience, or a symbolic interpretation of the sacred circle; the tipi also had the potential to become a potent source of emotional comfort and reassurance.

As the builders of this sacred entity, it would seem likely that women would have high status within the tribe. Although early anthropologists placed little value on domestic tasks, the Blackfoot culture recognized the essential contributions that resulted from these tasks. In addition to constructing the tipi, Blackfeet women were also responsible for preparing food and clothing, but their domestic role was not perceived as an oppressive one. On the contrary, McClintock asserts that "women considered it their vocation and allowed no interference from the men, who knew nothing about such things."<sup>29</sup> This rigid

distinction between roles served to amplify rather than belittle the role of women in providing for tribal subsistence.

In addition to being respected for their skill and utility as housekeepers, Blackfeet women were highly valued for their ability to give birth. The Blackfeet considered childbirth to be a clear and undisputed sign of spiritual power. As one Native American woman described it, "men have to dream to get power from the spirits, and they think of everything they can—songs and speeches and marching around, hoping that the spirits will notice them and give them some power. But we *have* power . . . Children. Can any warrior make a child, no matter how brave and wonderful he is?"<sup>30</sup>

Another major indicator of women's status was the extent of their involvement in religious ceremonies. Although many of the religious ceremonies were conducted by men, very often women had an important part to play in these ceremonies. Even if the women did not actually preside over particular rituals, they were fully educated regarding this task. The fact that such information was accessible to both sexes stands in marked contrast to the women's clear domination of housekeeping tasks, in which men were forbidden to participate.

It is extremely important to recognize that the highest religious event among the Blackfeet, the annual Sun Dance, had to be sponsored by a woman. A contemporary Blackfoot woman stated that "this fact, by itself, has long helped women to have a special standing in our tribe."<sup>31</sup> The Sun Dance celebrated and reaffirmed the spiritual connections between the tribe and the universe and as such was a ritual of renewal and revitalization. The prerequisite for sponsorship of this ceremony is that a woman must be noble, upstanding, and, most importantly, she must have been faithful to her husband. Although in many cultures female chastity is a means of oppression, this is not the case among the Blackfeet. Rather than promoting fidelity based on the belief that women were the property of their husbands, the Blackfeet recognized that it took "great presence of mind and will power" to remain monogamous. "The steadfast, disciplined character demonstrated by an unsullied woman was comparable to the firm courage of a warrior, and indeed, the women proclaimed their chastity in the manner of men recounting their war exploits."<sup>32</sup>

The Blackfoot Indian woman's position of high standing within the tribe is further underscored by her status in mythology. More than mere

entertainment, myths and stories taught children about the less tangible parts of their culture, such as morals, ideals, and ethics. The myths of primary importance are those that describe the origins of the tribe and its customs. What becomes clear in these myths is that the American Indian's sense of the cosmos was very much an awareness of balance. As John and Donna Terrell point out in *Indian Women of the Western Morning*, American Indians accept that "for apparent reasons, each [sex] was endowed with peculiar qualities and sensibilities, neither was accorded supremacy, and each was made dependent on the other for existence."<sup>33</sup>

Early anthropologists were able to tell us who made the tipis and how many buffalo hides were needed, but they did not understand the importance of this information within the context of Blackfoot culture. Consequently, early male anthropologists reported that Native American women were drudges at the mercy of their male counterparts, whereas evidence from the women themselves reveals that the role of the American Indian woman within her tribe was important and indeed essential. Among the Blackfeet Indians, the women were the builders of the tribe on many levels: they constructed the shelter, they gave birth to new generations, and in the annual celebration of the Sun

Dance they presided over a ceremony of renewal and revitalization. A traditional Cheyenne saying exemplifies the intrinsic role that women played in the well-being of Native American cultures, including the Blackfeet peoples:

A nation is not conquered  
Until the hearts of its  
women  
Are on the ground.  
Then it is done, no matter  
How brave its warriors  
Nor how strong its  
weapons.<sup>34</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 48.
- 2 After 1830, the Blackfoot people became involved with white commerce as American manufacturers discovered a variety of uses for buffalo hides. At this point, the Blackfoot economy changed from one of subsistence to one involved with surplus production. See William Farr, *The Reservation Blackfeet* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), p. 4. The following pages focus on Blackfeet customs prior to the 1830s. Horses were fully integrated into the culture, but involvement with the fur trade had yet to commence. The lifestyle is one of nomadic subsistence.
- 3 Katherine M. Weist, "Plains Indian Women: An Assessment," *Anthropology on the Great Plains*, in W. Raymond Hood and Margot Liberty, eds., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 255–271.
- 4 Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 81.
- 5 George Catlin, *North American Indians* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), pp. 50–51.
- 6 Weist, p. 260.
- 7 John C. Ewers, "Mothers of the Mixed-Bloods: The Marginal Woman in the History of the Upper Missouri," *Probing the American West* (Kenneth R. Toole, 1962), p. 62.
- 8 John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 109–110.
- 9 R. and G. Laubin, *The Indian Tipi* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 205.
- 10 John C. Ewers, *Blackfeet Crafts*, Indian Handicrafts Booklet #9 (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.), p. 12.
- 11 Walter McClintock, *The Blackfoot Tipi*, Southwest Museum Leaflet Number 5 (Los Angeles: Southwest Museum, n.d.), p. 8.
- 12 Laubin, p. 51.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.
- 14 John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfeet Culture*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin #159 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1955), p. 251.
- 15 This is partially in response to there being many more women than men, primarily due to heavy war losses. Another impetus for polygamy, especially among the successful hunters, was that many hands were needed to manage a household, both on the move and in camp. See *Ibid.*
- 16 Beverly Hungry Wolf, *The Ways of My Grandmothers* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 127.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 18 Adolf Hungry Wolf, *Tipi Life* (Invermere, British Columbia, Canada: Good Medicine Books, 1972), p. 8.
- 19 Joseph Epes Brown and Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indians* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1972), p. 50.
- 20 Beverly Hungry Wolf, p. 127.
- 21 Richard Conn, *Circles of the World: Traditional Art of the Plains Indians* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1982), p. 8.
- 22 The sense of reassurance provided by the tipi encampment is a function of the massiveness of the prairies. "Walking alone across the prairie quickly impresses one with the vastness of the universe and the insignificance of the self" (Adolf Hungry Wolf, *The Blood People: A Division of the Blackfoot Confederacy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 227). The tipi encampment would be particularly inviting at night, when the brightly glowing tipis would contrast sharply with the darkness of the prairie.
- 23 *Op. Cit.* page 9
- 24 Elizabeth Weatherford, "Women's Traditional Architecture," *HERESIES* (May 1977), p. 35.
- 25 Adolf Hungry Wolf, 1972, p. 24.
- 26 Ewers, 1958, p. 165.
- 27 Adolf Hungry Wolf, 1977, p. 123.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 29 McClintock, p. 8.
- 30 Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Muller Sands, *American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives* (New York: The Dial Press, 1974), p. 48.
- 31 Beverly Hungry Wolf, p. 31.
- 32 Alice B. Kehoe, "The Function of Ceremonial Sexual Intercourse Among the Northern Plains Indians," *Plains Anthropologist* (May 1970), p. 102.
- 33 John and Donna Terrell, *Indian Women of the Western Morning* (New York: The Dial Press, 1974), p. 4.
- 34 Bataille and Sands, p. vi.