

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

American Indian Grandmothers: Traditions and Transitions. Edited by Marjorie M. Schweitzer

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/24v8h2zb>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 25(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Foster, Martha Harroun

Publication Date

2001-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REVIEWS

American Indian Grandmothers: Traditions and Transitions. Edited by Marjorie M. Schweitzer. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. 239 pages. \$49.95 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

Editor Marjorie M. Schweitzer honors the grandmothers who are the inspiration and subject of *American Indian Grandmothers*, a work primarily based on papers read at the 1985 and 1986 American Anthropological Association symposia "American Indian Grandmothers: Historical and Contemporary Issues" and "American Indian Grandmothers II: Status, Tradition and Change." The articles range from Schweitzer's chapter on the role of grandmothers in maintaining Otoe identity and distinction while creatively adapting to changing conditions, to Joan Weibel-Orlando's study of the effect of grandmother roles on their grandchildren's lives. In other chapters, Ann Lane Hedlund examines Navajo grandmothers' transmissions of values and reinforcement of social and economic relationships through weaving, while Bruce Miller explores the evolving political roles of coastal Salish women. Alice Schlegel presents an overview of the nature of grandmotherhood in Hopi matrilineal society, Karen Ritts Benally examines the persistence of grandmother roles as the practical application of such roles change, and Pamela Amoss looks at the Puget Sound Salish grandmothers in cultural texts. A poem by Patricia McCabe and concluding remarks by Schweitzer complete the volume. In her conclusion, Schweitzer briefly summarizes the nature of grandmotherhood and the aging process but warns of the difficulties inherent in using the study of Indian grandmothers to glean insights applicable to other cultures. Indian grandmothers' roles, she points out, are tied to the unique cultures from which they arise and do not necessarily lend themselves to intercultural generalizations.

In each of the chapters, Schweitzer and the other authors illustrate the centrality of grandmothers' roles in childrearing, teaching, and cultural transmission. Grandmothers are creators, protectors, and providers. Known by a variety of different names representing complex kinship relations, or simply as "old woman," they play a central role in everyday and ceremonial life. The authors detail not only the historical roles of grandmothers but also the persistence and adaptation of grandmothers' roles over time. In

doing so, they provide a much-needed examination of the interplay of gender and aging in Native society.

The complexity of Indian grandmothering reflects the diversity of Native America and assures that there are many ways of being a grandmother. In addition to the usual biological definition, there are cultural definitions tied to the structure of each Indian society. As Joan Weibel-Orlando explains, “the status of grandmother is at once biologically and socially achieved and ascribed” (p. 181). Kinship systems and clan organization, as well as practices such as adoption, all play a part in creating unique patterns of grandmothering within each group. Matrilineal, matrifocal societies’ expectations of grandmotherly behavior naturally differ from those in more patrifocal or patrilineal societies. But with all these differences, commonalities in the roles of Native grandmothers stand out. Childrearing and childcare are the most important and widespread responsibilities, although the specific nature of childcare changes over time. Karen Ritts Benally provides an example of such change in “Thinking Good: The Teachings of Navajo Grandmothers.” She explains how Lilly George, a present-day grandmother, and her grandmother, Helen Claschee, held similar beliefs about the grandmotherly responsibilities; nevertheless, each adapted her behavior to meet current conditions. Claschee maintained a flock of sheep to insure the well being of her grandchildren. Decades later, her granddaughter, Lilly, assumed responsibility for her grandchildren’s future by providing for their education and stressing the importance of a good job.

As expected in a collection of articles from 1985 and 1986 symposia, much of the work in *Grandmothers* is based on research and sources from the 1980s. While this does not diminish the relevance of the work, a sequel incorporating the authors’ latest research and its implications for the new century would be welcome. More serious for students of gender and aging in Indian society, references are not always clear. For example, in Alice Schlegel’s article, fascinating and relevant information is doubtlessly drawn from her extensive research, but those who might want to pursue the subject will have difficulty discovering specific sources. Additionally, since this is a study of grandmothers’ roles and status both today and over time in diverse Native societies, a more precise historical context would have been helpful. Several studies do not provide a clear timeframe, and Benally refers to a “traditional” past without reference to the time period in question. Assumptions about what is “traditional” require identification in space, time, and social context—even more so when we are examining transitions within such traditions.

Such minor points do not obscure the importance of this collection. A valuable review of a neglected subject, this work is of interest not just to scholars of Native peoples, but also to students of gender and aging. Well-written and thoughtful, *Grandmothers* will appeal to the interested public and is useful for undergraduate and graduate classes. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this work is its potential for expanding and enriching the study of aging and gender in American society.

Martha Harroun Foster

Middle Tennessee State University