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Lakota Women's Artistic Strategies in Support of the Social System

MARSHA CLIFT BOL

The role of the Lakota (also known as the Teton Dakota or Western Sioux) woman has been so completely overshadowed by that of the flamboyant Lakota warrior in ethnographic literature and elsewhere that we know very little regarding her thoughts and behavior during the tremendous societal upheaval which occurred during the move onto the reservation in the late nineteenth century. However, one feminine manifestation, the costume arts, provides us with information about her reaction to social change.

At first glance it appears incongruous that, precisely when the traditional order was under its greatest stress in Lakota history, the women produced their most elaborate artwork, indeed lavishly covering everything in sight with beadwork. In 1889 an Anglo female missionary teacher at Standing Rock Agency on the Sioux reservation observed: "Under this shade the women did fancy work with buckskin, beads and porcupine quills brightly dyed, or sewed while the children played and the men loafed after sporadic attempts at farming or caring for a few cattle" (Jacobsen 1959: 46).¹ In order to explain this behavior on the part of the women, clearly divergent from that of the men, it is first necessary to determine the function of the arts in Lakota society before the move to the reservation.

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The fifty years prior to incarceration on the reservation, generally referred to as the Pre-reservation period (1825-1875), were the most prosperous in Lakota history. Fully mounted on horseback and equipped with firearms, the Lakota people roamed the plains of the Dakotas and beyond in pursuit of the numerous buffalo herds. Buffalo provided not only the day to day needs of the Dakota themselves but also supplied a thriving fur trade. The hunt was an important mechanism available to the Lakota male, providing him with ample opportunity to attain social rank through his demonstration of prowess and courage.

A social system developed around the concept of bravery and its achievement. It was the primary goal of every Lakota male, and was best attained through success in warfare, the hunt, and horse raids on other camps. However, in order for a brave man to receive recognition, his deeds needed to be proclaimed. As a result, an artistic support system developed to sustain this important social value. A brave man was permitted to wear a painted robe that displayed pictographically a successful battle in which he had participated. He might own a painted tipi or shield bearing the emblems of the acquisition of supernatural power, and he might also wear handsomely beaded or quilled clothing.

Pictorial art was exclusively a male prerogative. A warrior was permitted to paint scenes of his successes in warfare or raiding parties upon his buffalo robe, his tipi (fig. 1), or tipi liner. This recapitulation of his deeds was closely monitored for truthfulness and accuracy by his peers. When worn or displayed, the painted items thus established his reputation, acting essentially as institutionalized forms of publicity continuously on exhibition for public viewing. Occasionally the owner would narrate his heroic deeds in the presence of his robe or tipi liner, thus providing illustrative reinforcement for his tale (Jahner 1975: 180).²

Supernatural powers obtained through vision quests or dreams were also displayed on the warrior's personal shield (fig. 2), or occasionally his tipi. Again a message was conveyed by artistic means, this time implying that the owner was an important man, one who had the assistance and power bestowed by a supernatural.

Concomitant to a Lakota man's demonstration of bravery was his display of generosity, in itself considered an extension of



FIGURE 1: Lakota tipi by Standing Bear, 1884–88.
Denver Art Museum, 1963.271.
(Photo courtesy of the Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado.)

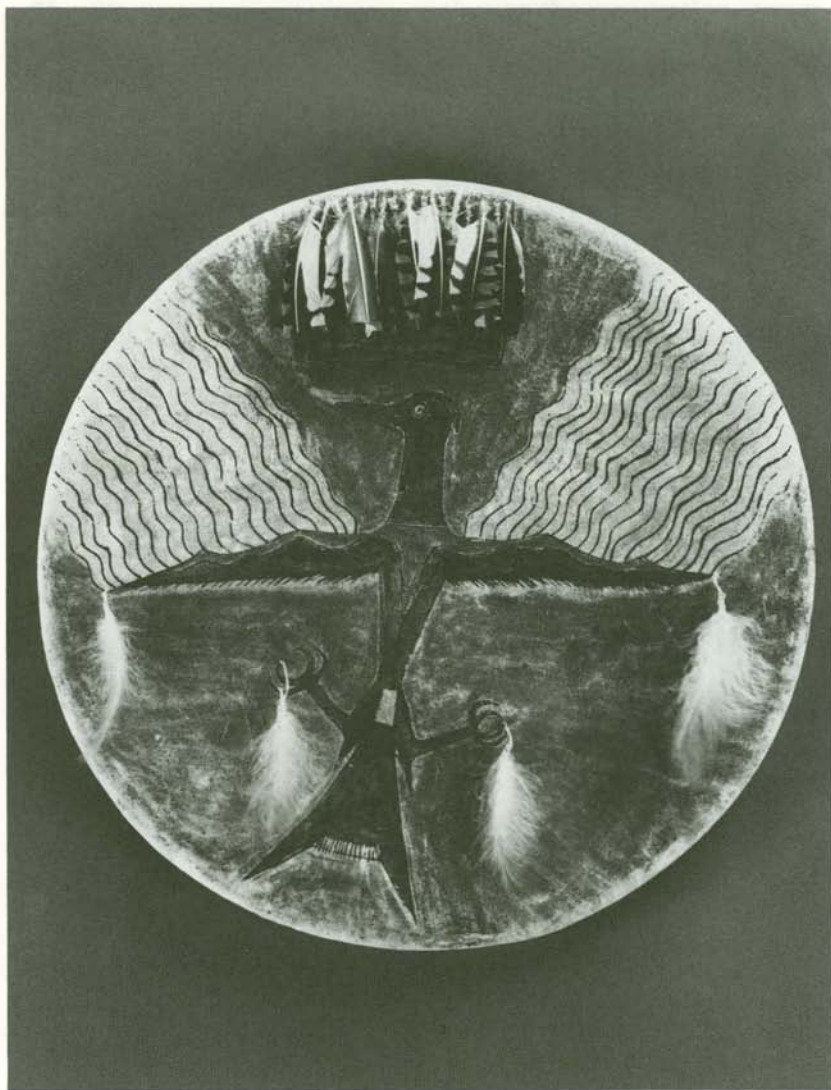


FIGURE 2: Lakota shield, ca. 1870.
Denver Art Museum, 1932.237.
(Photo courtesy of the Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado.)

bravery. Generosity was most often manifested in the social institution of the giveaway. The Lakota made a point of gift-giving at the least provocation. Events such as weddings, funerals, births, puberty rites, the Sun Dance, offered the opportunity for a giveaway. Accumulated goods were presented to others in the name of the one to be honored, such as a newborn child, while at the same time the gift-giver himself received honor indirectly. In some instances the amount of goods might be extraordinary, as in the case of the death of a loved one, when a man gave away all that he owned. Horses were traditionally the most valued possessions, and hence the most extravagant gifts. A beautifully decorated dress or robe was equally as prized, however.

Lakota women supported this social system of generosity and bravery by producing the preponderance of the fine garments worn by warriors and given as gifts. Production, however, was not arbitrary. Significant social messages were conveyed with the presentation of a fine garment. For example, before departing for a major battle a Lakota warrior was honored with the gift of several pairs of moccasins from his female relatives, who by this act were assisting him toward success (Deloria 1937?a: 37).³

If a Lakota man wore a buffalo robe with many rows of quillwork, this was an indication of the high regard in which he was held by his female relatives. "In the last analysis, this indicated a man's worth; for if he did not conform to correct ways by doing his part towards his female relatives, they in turn would not think him worthy of such painstaking work" (Deloria 1937?b: 101-102).⁴ Of course, his "part" was the provision of food (success in the hunt), and the provision of camp safety and welfare (success in warfare).

If the ideal Lakota male was brave and generous, then the ideal female was good-looking with fine long braids of plentiful hair, chaste, and artistic (Deloria *ca.* 1937: 82).⁵ A woman who was skilled in the arts of quilling and beadwork commanded the respect and admiration of her peers.

The arts were a significant contribution that a Lakota woman made to her community, and she therefore devoted a large part of her time and energy to them. Training began early in life and was focused upon during the major feminine transition, the rite of puberty.

When a girl experienced her first menses, she notified her mother, who took her to a separate wigwam or small tipi. Isolated there for four days, the mother would ceremoniously teach her the art of quill embroidery and moccasin-making. As one old person expressed it, "Even though she has learned quilling before, the girl must quill continuously for four days. If she does this she will be good with the awl; if she does not, she will never be industrious." (Hassrick 1964: 41).⁶

After the rite of puberty, the young maiden was expected to give up childish freedom and play, and work quietly for hours each day on handwork (Lyford 1940: 60).⁷ As a guarantee of her eligibility for marriage, a young Lakota woman was required to exhibit her accomplishment in the arts of quilling and beadwork, just as a young Lakota male was required to demonstrate his capability as a hunter and a warrior before he was eligible to marry (Standing Bear 1933: 105).⁸

Women's art operated as an important vehicle in confirming and maintaining kinship relationships. The young Lakota bride, immediately upon arriving at her mother-in-law's tipi for the first time, set about making a pair of moccasins to demonstrate her ability as a good wife and daughter-in-law (Standing Bear 1933: 110).⁹ If a daughter-in-law failed to make beaded moccasins for her husband's people, it was regarded as a sign of bad feelings (Deloria 1937?b: 74).¹⁰ When a child was born to the young couple, it was the husband's sister who provided a beaded cradle board. If she failed to honor her brother in this way, it was an indication that he lacked the respect of an important relation, which significantly hindered his standing in the community (Mirsky 1937: 399).¹¹

Handsome clothing was a sign of the esteem which the wearer was accorded by the maker. This in turn created admiration in the eyes of observers and ultimately enhanced the status of both the wearer and the maker. As a result, it significantly added to the prestige of a woman's family if the members were dressed in fine clothing.

Artistic production required substantial time set aside in an already crowded workday. In order to accommodate artistic endeavors, an extraordinary division of labor between a daughter

of child-bearing age and her mother (or mother-in-law) has been reported in one instance (whether this occurred on a broad scale is unknown). Mirsky stated that until the mother was quite elderly, she continued to help her daughter by caring for the small children and doing much of the heavy labor.

During this period the daughter takes over the pleasanter, sedentary tasks of porcupine work, while the mother tans the hides, or the daughter does the fancywork on pair after pair of moccasins while her mother sews the soles on and finishes them. If a daughter of 35 tans the skins while her mother does porcupine quillwork, people will say, "She tans hides at her age!" "She is still doing embroidery!" (Mirsky 1937: 397).¹²

In retrospect, we find that during the pre-reservation period, the arts, particularly those related to costume, had an important supportive role in traditional Lakota society. For the Lakota male, costume was a valued means of communicating prowess in warfare, and for gaining honor through generosity. Symbols of achievements painted in the representational style by the warrior, and quilled and beaded shirts, leggings, and moccasins made by his wife and female relatives, conveyed his success and proclaimed his fame in a meaningful way to the rest of his society.

The arts were a powerful tool for the Lakota woman. She employed them as a mechanism to support the Lakota system of bravery and generosity by validating the successful warriors, to maintain kinship relationships, and to sustain the system of esteem which in turn led to status and prestige for members of her family. In essence, women's art supported and maintained the basic values of traditional Lakota society. This close relationship between women's art and the social institutions of the Lakota did not cease during the Reservation period (1876–ca. 1925) although this was a period of severe societal disruption and stress.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, a rapid succession of historical events fostered a breakdown of Lakota society. In 1868, the large Lakota reservation was established in western South Dakota. The Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876 brought the defeat of Custer, and with it the white retaliatory campaign which spelled the Lakota final military defeat. At that point the

majority of the Lakota moved onto the reservation. In 1881 the U.S. government prohibited the holding of the Sun Dance henceforth. The final great buffalo hunt was held in 1882; a buffalo was last killed by a Lakota in 1883. In 1889 the Lakota reservation was broken into five smaller reservations with an agency roll for each reservation. "After these agency rolls were completed it was expected that the Indians would not leave their reservations without passes from the agent" (Densmore 1918: 4).¹³

The cumulative impact of these events upon the Lakota people was enormous. Whereas in 1880 the social, political, and religious framework of the Lakota remained largely intact, the following decade ushered in an era of profound stress (Utley 1963: 21).¹⁴ Many Lakota institutions could not withstand such drastic change. Warfare, one of the primary activities of the men, was no longer possible. As a result, war societies ceased to function and the principal means of attaining prestige, rank, and wealth vanished. The Lakota economy collapsed with the disappearance of the buffalo. Traditional diet and the materials for many objects perished, as did other means for the Lakota hunter-warrior to gain recognition. The religious framework and social structure were vastly weakened by the ban on the Sun Dance.

The prohibition of the Sun Dance took away not only much of the security which religion gave to the people but also the public rewarding and sanctioning of social life and social institutions. The ending of this reinforcement of the Dakota custom and the instruction of the young people by observation and participation contributed greatly to the weakening of social controls and the crumbling of Dakota culture. (MacGregor 1946:91)¹⁵

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

The combination of these events was particularly devastating for the Lakota male. His role was completely undermined, leaving him stripped of his function as protector and provider and with no means of achieving cultural approval through warrior status and hunting prowess. Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota chief, recorded the reaction: "It was as if a runner suddenly felt

the ground beneath his feet disappear, leaving him off balance and plunging over a precipice" (Standing Bear 1933: 177).¹⁶

It is not surprising that the Ghost Dance, which provided hope for the return of the old life, was such a powerful attraction. However, with the culmination of the Ghost Dance events in the notorious and bloody battle at Wounded Knee in the winter of 1890, the recognition of the impossibility of escape from white subjugation became unavoidable (MacGregor 1946: 33).¹⁷ Black Elk gives voice to this despair:

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. (Neihardt 1932: 230).¹⁸

The hopelessness of the situation was particularly damaging to the Lakota male population, resulting in generally non-productive, apathetic behavior with a high degree of alcoholism. As Deloria reported:

It was they [Lakota men] who suffered the most from the enforced change, whether they realized it or not. It was their life primarily that was wrecked; it was their exclusive occupation that was abruptly ended. The women could go right on bearing children and rearing them. They could cook, feed their families, set up and strike camp unaided, pack and unpack when on a trip. Even embroidery, exclusively a woman's art, was not cut off suddenly. . . . The man was the tragic figure. . . . And so he sat by the hour, indifferent and inactive, watching—perhaps envying—his wife, as she went right on working at the same essential role of woman. (Deloria 1944: 95-96).¹⁹

Thus, it became the task of the Lakota women to maintain the cultural traditions. In a study carried out in 1960 on the reservations of Pine Ridge and Rosebud, an economist and a social-clinical psychologist confirmed that this is precisely what they did:

Their transition to life as captives in the reservations allowed them to carry into the new way of life their old roles of mother and wife as private affairs, left untouched for a long period after the men lost their special function of dealing with problems outside the family and the group. As they came to acquire more autonomy as the persons responsible for the maintenance and support of family life, they became even freer to continue to raise their children as they were taught children should be raised. The traditional values held by the older people reinforced the role of the mother as a cultural refuge where Sioux practices could be kept alive beyond the reach of external suppression. That refuge became increasingly more crucial as children had to be surrendered to white schools at a younger age. (Hagen and Shaw 1960: 10-18).²⁰

Lakota women also continued to practice their traditional arts. As in pre-reservation days, the costumes which they manufactured contributed to the identity of family and society. Two new conditions, however, had to be confronted: the vacancy left by the masculine counterpart for achieving and maintaining group identity; and the everpresent threat of white assimilation. The women responded to this changed situation by creating some of the most elaborate beaded costumes in Lakota history while the masculine artistic endeavors generally ceased, with the exception of ledger drawings made for sale and some recording of past heroic achievements on muslin and canvas.

Women's reservation beaded art is characterized by increased complexity of pattern, complete beading of items, incorporation of new forms, and inclusion of the pictorial image in the repertoire. Increased complexity of pattern after 1875 has been noted by Lyford (1940: 67). It was during this time that the Lakota women developed a style distinctively their own, which is characterized by delicate, nervous line and complex compositions constructed of geometric elements, particularly triangles, forked lines, and terraces (fig. 3).

In addition to complexity of design, a tendency to bead items completely was initiated during the reservation period. Pohrt (1975:9),²¹ one of the few to note this change, states:



FIGURE 3: Detail, Lakota beaded saddle blanket. Late 19th century.
(Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico.)

The artistic appeal of a particular item seems, in part, to have been determined by the number of square inches of beadwork used. A tendency to bead objects completely may be seen on examples of every item the Sioux produced at this time. . . . The ultimate examples of this aestheticism are completely beaded dresses. The sheer weight of the glass beads would have made wearing of these dresses an unpleasant experience (1975:9).

Many of these completely beaded dresses were made for young Lakota girls (fig. 4). Since comfort and practicality were certainly not the thoughts foremost in the minds of the makers, what prompted the artists to create such elaborate dresses? And why were many pairs of moccasins not only beaded on the uppers but on the soles as well, obviously eschewing practicality in favor of elaboration? One answer may lie in the staging of the annual summer intra-tribal gathering on the Fourth of July, probably as a replacement for the prohibited Sun Dance. The July 4th celebration provided a stage for displaying such finery, as well as an opportunity for holding munificent giveaways, which had become increasingly elaborate (Blish 1967: 424),²² perhaps in an endeavor to fill the vacancy left by other lost social institutions. The proud wearing of fine regalia gave an opportunity for establishing the social position of the individual and the family in the midst of visiting bands, while the giveaway provided an opportunity to maintain the traditional institution of generosity and with it the honor received as a by-product.

If the Fourth of July celebrations served as a mechanism for the internal reinforcement of the important Lakota values in group members, then the Wild West show provided the arena for external reinforcement of the cultural self-image, with costume acting as an important vehicle. Hundreds of thousands of non-Indians viewed the Lakota in costume during the Wild West tours in America and Europe from 1883 until World War I, thereby coming to associate their costume with the Indian image. As Hyde observed, "Early in the 1880's the Pine Ridge Indians had hit on a method of making a living that suited them well. Large numbers of these Indians went off with Wild West shows and circuses. . . . Their work was to pose as warriors, and it suited them to keep up the ways of warriors." (1956: xiii).²³



FIGURE 4: Lakota girl's fully-beaded dress. Late 19th century.
(Winona Trading Post, Santa Fe, New Mexico.)

Luther Standing Bear described his method of selection for the Wild West:

McCune and I gave a feast, to which all the Indians who wanted to go out with the show were invited to come in full costume, so we could "size them up" and select those who had good outfits. We watched their dancing very closely, and some of the young people did look very pretty indeed. We selected those having the finest outfits and who were the best dancers, and who, in our opinion, would not drink. (1928: 270).²⁴

The effect on the Lakota of the presentation of their costume in the Wild West seems to have been two-fold: it provided a means for the Lakota to announce their national identity literally to the world; and the fact that audiences responded with enthusiasm and overwhelming numbers validated Lakota identity, as well as creating an extension of that identity to encompass the notion that all "authentic" Indians should look like Lakotas, dressed in beads, buckskin, and feathers.

The fully beaded vest (fig. 5) was a clothing form that found special favor with the men and boys who traveled with the Wild West shows and with the newly adapted Lakota cowboy around the turn of the century. The white man's cloth vest, available as an annuity good, was either beaded fully so that none of the cloth remained visible, or recreated in cowhide and beads. Plains women had long before recognized the opportunities available with white man's goods, beads being a primary example of the incorporation of new materials into the craftswoman's repertoire of techniques. Although the form and the materials of the vest were non-Indian, such an acceptance did not imply an equal acceptance of the white man's ways. On the contrary, the trade vest continued to be decorated in the traditional Lakota techniques and with the Lakota objective of prestigious clothing in mind. In addition to these roles, the fully beaded vest may have served as a mediator between the non-Indian world and Lakota tradition, being an acceptable form in both worlds.

The introduction of pictorial imagery into beadwork is found particularly on the vest (fig. 6) and the pipebag, both masculine items. The representational form of artwork was traditionally the exclusive prerogative of the Lakota male, enforced by the sexual division of labor (Lyford 1940: 12).²⁵ How then did male imagery

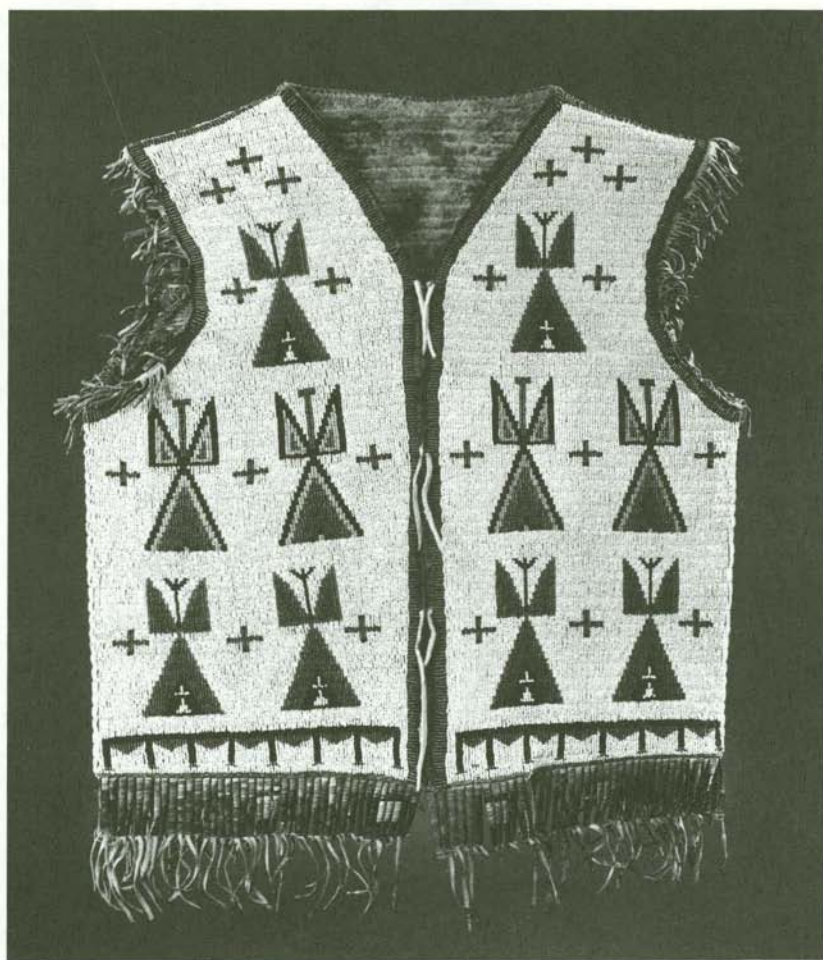


FIGURE 5: Lakota beaded vest, ca. 1895.
Denver Art Museum, 1944.28.
(Photo courtesy of the Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado.)



FIGURE 6: Lakota pictorial beaded vest. Late 19th century.
(*Winona Trading Post, Santa Fe, New Mexico.*)

come to be combined with a female technique? There are several potential explanations. Perhaps, in the state of confusion and disarray, this practice of separation of artistic traditions was upset along with many others. However, as we have seen, women's art was extremely resistant and survived the shift from pre-reservation to reservation remarkably intact. It is possible that men drew the designs which the women then beaded. Even if that were the case, the transferral of pictorial imagery from men's to women's media still remains unexplained. The most satisfying interpretation resides with the role shift discussed previously. Women may have assumed the masculine artistic role, just as they had in other areas, in order to maintain both the Lakota tradition of recording heroic events and the traditional Lakota life. Wissler has recorded one such example, a boy's pictorially beaded vest, as the object of military decoration, and "claimed to reflect the deeds of the family" (1904: 267).²⁶

Many of the reservation era garments were fashioned for children. It was the children, however, who were the particular target of assimilation through education. In the late nineteenth century, the U.S. government, in an all-out effort to expeditiously assimilate the Indian into Anglo society, mandated the wearing of "citizen's" clothing by Indian school children. As Standing Bear recalls: "At Carlisle the transforming, the 'civilizing' process began. It began with clothes. Never . . . could we be civilized while wearing moccasins and blankets" (1933: 232).²⁷ By creating particularly fine traditional clothing for her children, a mother found a method for combating the threat of assimilation.

A further indication of the significant role which costume continued to play in the reservation era can be found in the creation of the Ghost Dance dress in 1889. The costume of the Ghost Dance assumed the function of a form of rebellion against the usage of non-Indian products, and of a powersource of protection from the enemy, in this case, bullets.

Although the Ghost Dance costume quickly proved inadequate to the task, the beaded costume continued to be produced into the 1920s, thus implying that it was not deficient in accomplishing its multiple tasks. Given the traditional role of costume as a support system for important pre-reservation values such as bravery, generosity, kinship, esteem, and prestige, it is not unreasonable that costume was resorted to as a primary protective mechanism in the endeavor to contend with the external threat

of assimilation and the internal threat of societal breakdown during the reservation era.

When art is a culturally sanctioned endeavor, as it was for the Lakota, it is quite effective in supporting and conserving the traditional value system in the face of threatened disruption. Art can operate as a potent force in maintaining a cultural self-image due to its high visibility and yet non-aggressive character. The Lakota provide a clear-cut example of this operation, spearheaded by the women. Lakota costume assumed the task of reaffirming and maintaining Lakota cultural identity in the midst of tremendous stress. Proliferation and intensification of its elaboration only enhanced the costume's potential for defining and protecting the ethnic boundaries of the Lakota from encroachment by the outside world. In essence, art was the Lakota woman's strategy in the battle to resist cultural change.

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