

LESBIANS IN AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURES

I. Introduction

The Lesbian is to the American Indian what the Indian is to the American—invisible.¹ Among the Sioux there were women known as the “manly-hearted women” who, it seems, functioned as warriors. Whether they were Lesbians is not mentioned in references to them. Indeed, their existence was a pretty well kept secret, and little is made of it. Among the Cherokee there were women known as Beloved Women who were warriors, leaders, and influential council members. But among the Cherokee, all women had real influence in tribal matters until reorganization was necessitated by American removal attempts. It is not known, however, whether the Beloved Women were Lesbians.

In my reading about American Indians, I have never read an overt account of Lesbians, and that reading has included hundreds of books and articles.² The closest anyone has come, to my knowledge, is a novel by Fred Manfred entitled *The Manly-Hearted Woman*, and though its protagonist dresses as a man and rejects her feminine role, and though she marries a woman, the writer is very explicit: she and her “wife” do not share intimacies—a possibility which seems beyond the writer’s ability to envision. Indeed, she eventually falls in love with a rather strange young warrior who is possessed of enormous sexual attractiveness (given him by spirit-power and a curious genetic circumstance). After the warrior’s death, the Manly-Hearted Woman divorces her wife and returns to woman’s garb and occupation, discarding the spirit stone which has determined her life to that point.³

Because there are few direct references to Lesbians or Lesbianism among American Indians that I am aware of, much of my discussion of them here is necessarily conjectural. The conjectures are based on secure knowledge of American Indian social systems and customs which I have gathered from study and from personal information on the American Indian people—of whom I am one—and on my knowledge of Lesbian culture and practice.

Certainly, the chances that aboriginal American women formed affectional alliances are enormous. There was a marked tendency among many of the tribes to encourage virginity or some version of chastity among pubescent women; this tendency was rarely found with respect to the sexual habits of married women, however, and it referred to intercourse with males. Nothing is said, to my knowledge, about sexual liaisons between women, except indirectly. It is equally likely that such relationships were practiced with social sanction, though no one is presently talking about this. The history of Native America is selective; and those matters pertaining to women that might contradict a Western patriarchist world view are carefully selected out.

Some suggestions about how things were in "time immemorial," as the old folks refer to pre-contact times, have managed to find their way into contemporary literature about American Indians. Many tribes have recorded stories concerning daughters born to spirit women who were dwelling alone on earth. These daughters then would become the mothers of entire tribes. In one such tale, first mother was "born of the dew of the leaf of the beautiful plant."⁴ Such tales point to a time prior to the advent of the patriarchy. While historical and archeological evidence suggest that this time pre-dated European contact in some regions of the Western Hemisphere, the change in cultural orientation was still proceeding. The tribes became more male-oriented and more male-dominated as acculturation accelerated. As this process continued, less and less was likely to be said by American Indians about Lesbians among them. Indeed, less and less about women in any position other than that sanctioned by missionaries was likely to be recorded.

There are a number of understandings about the entire issue that will be important in my discussion of American Indian women—heterosexual or Lesbian. It is my contention and belief that those two groups were not nearly as separate as modern Lesbian and straight women are. My belief is based on my understanding of the cultures and social systems in which women lived. These societies were tribal, and tribal consciousness, with its attendant social structures, differs enormously from that of the contemporary Western world.

This difference requires new understanding of a number of concepts. The concept of family, the concept of community, the concept of women, the concept of bonding and belonging, and the concept of power were all distinctly understood in a tribal matrix;

and those concepts were/are very different from those current in modern America.

The primarily Spirit-directed nature of the American Indians must be understood before the place of women, and the place of Lesbians, will be comprehensible. Without that understanding, almost anything about American Indians will seem trivial, obscure, or infuriating. To put it simply, the tribes believed that all human and non-human activities were directly related to the Spirit world. They believed that human beings belonged in a universe that was alive, intelligent, and aware, and that all matters were as much in the province of the Spirits as of human beings.

This perception was not based on fantasy or on speculation. It did not spring from some inarticulate longing planted deep within the savage breast by some instinctive human need to understand and manipulate reality. That scholars and folklorists can believe that it did testifies to their distance from a tribal world. In fact, the American Indian people, of whatever tribe, grounded their belief in the Spirit world firmly upon their own personal, direct and communal experience. Those who are traditionals today still place the same construction on actual events. They speak directly to a Spirit being, as directly as you might speak to a lunch companion.

Because this is so, their understanding of bonding, sexual relationships, power, familial order, and community was quite different from a modern Christian's view. Included in one's family were a number of Spirit people. Among those who shared intimately in one's personal and private reality were one or more personal Spirit guides; on the advice of these guides rested many of the decisions and activities in which any person engaged.

II. Family and Community in American Indian Life

Much of modern society and culture among American Indians results from acculturation. Christianity has imposed certain imperatives on the tribes, as has the growing tendency to "mainstream" Indians through schooling, economic requirements, and local, state, and federal regulation of their lifestyles. The Iroquois, for example, changed the basic structure of their households after the American Revolution. The whiteman determined that they had defeated the Longhouse (the term denoting Iroquois tribal groupings, or the

Iroquois nation as a whole)—though they had not even fought the Iroquois. Social disorder of enormous magnitude ensued. Handsome Lake, a Seneca prophet, received a series of visions that were to help his people accommodate to the whiteman. The central relationship of mother-daughter was thus destroyed, for Handsome Lake decreed that a woman should cleave to her husband and they should share a dwelling separate from her mother's (clan) longhouse.⁵

Among American Indians, Spirit-related persons are perceived as more closely linked than blood-related persons. Understanding this primary difference between American Indian values and modern Euro-American Judeo-Christian values is critical to understanding Indian familial structures and the context in which Lesbians functioned. For American Indian people, the primary value was relationship to the Spirit world. All else was determined by the essential nature of this understanding. Spirits, gods and goddesses, metaphysical/occult forces, and the right means of relating to them, determined the tribes' every institution, every custom, every endeavor and pastime. This was not peculiar to inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere, incidentally; it was at one time the primary value of all tribal people on earth.

Relationship to the Spirit world has been of primary value to tribespeople, but not to those who have studied them. Folklorists and ethnographers have other values which permeate their work and their understandings, so that most of what they have recorded or concluded about American Indians is simply wrong. Countless examples could illustrate this basic misunderstanding, but let me share just one, culled from the work of one of the more influential anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski. His massive study of the Keres Pueblo Acoma presumably qualified him as an authority on mother-right society in North America. In *Sex, Culture and Myth* Malinowski wrote: "Patrilocal households are 'united households,' while 'split households' are the exclusive phenomena of matrilineal mother-right cultures."⁶ While acknowledging that economic considerations alone do not determine the structure of marriage patterns, Malinowski fails to recognize marriage as a construct founded on laws derived from conversations with Spirits. The primary unit for a tribe is not, as he suggests, the household; even the term is misleading, because a tribal "household" includes a number of individuals who are clan rather than blood relatives. For non-tribal people, "household" typically means a unit composed of a father, mother, and offspring—though contemporary living arrangements often deviate from that stereotyped

conception. A tribal household might encompass assorted blood-kin, medicine society "kin," adoptees, servants, and visitors who have a clan or supernatural claim on membership although they are biologically unrelated to the rest of the household. Writing about tribal societies in Oceania, Malinowski wrote: "Throughout Oceania a network of obligations unites the members of the community and overrules the economic autonomy of the household."⁷ To a tribal person, the very notion of the household's autonomy appears to be nonsensical. To exemplify his view of tribal practices, Malinowski cites the Trobriand Islanders' requirement that a man give approximately half of his produce to his sister(s) and another portion to other relatives, thus using only the remainder for "his own household" which, Malinowski concedes, is largely supported by the wife's brother(s) and other relatives. I mention this example from a tribe which is not American Indian, because Malinowski himself encourages generalization: "Economic obligations," he continues, which "cut across the closed unity of the household could be quoted from every single tribe of which we have adequate information."⁸

Malinowski and other researchers have dismissed the household as an economic unit, but have continued to perceive households from the viewpoint of the nuclear family—father, mother(s), and offspring. He remains within the accepted, biased European understanding of "household" when he states:

The most important examples [of split-households] come from the communities organised in extreme mother-right, where husband and wife are in most matters members of different households, and their mutual economic contributions show the character of gifts rather than of mutual maintenance.⁹

The case of matrifocal-matrilocal households only seems extreme when one defines "household" in terms that do not allow for various styles of bonding. Malinowski believes that this "extreme mother-right" method of housing people is exceptional. He does concede that it results from conditions found in high-level cultures, rather than in "primitive" ones¹⁰— which is an extremely interesting observation. But in making it, he again relies on some assumptions that are not justified by available evidence.

If "household" signifies housing and food-provision systems, then the living arrangements of American Indians pose numerous problems, the matter of father-right versus mother-right being only

one. In fact, people were inclined to live wherever they found themselves, if living signifies where you stash your belongings, where you take your meals, and/or where you sleep. Throughout North America, men were inclined to have little personal paraphernalia, to eat wherever they were when meal-time came, and to sleep in whatever spot was convenient when they were tired. Clan, band, and medicine-society affiliations had a primary bearing on these arrangements, as did the across-the-board separation of the sexes practiced formally or informally by most tribes.

Malinowski's view assumes that households may take various forms, but that in any case they are unified to the extent that they may be spoken of as "mine" by a male who is husband to a woman and claims to be the father of her children. The "extreme" case of the "split household" occurs when a man who is identified as a woman's husband does not contribute to her economic life except by giving presents. This notion of "household" is pretty far from any held by tribal people with which I am familiar. Even among contemporary American Indians, a male who is identified as the husband of the lady of the house may not be (and often is not) the father of her children. But according to Malinowski, "The most important fact about such extreme matriarchal conditions [as among the Pueblo and several other groups cited] is that even there the principle of social legitimacy holds good; that though the father is domestically and economically almost superfluous, he is legally indispensable and the main bond of union between such matrilineal and matrilocal consorts is parenthood[sic]." ¹¹

Carefully examined, the foregoing observation makes no sense; even if it did, it suggests that even though fatherhood is irrelevant in the home or office, a male remains indispensable because his presence (which may be very infrequent) confers legitimacy on something. Indeed.

Analyses like those of Malinowski can only be explained by the distortive function of cultural bias. A Pueblo husband is important because husbands are important. But I have known many "husbands" who had several "wives" and could claim that a number of women (who might or might not be claimed as wives) were the mothers of their children. And this remains the case despite some two to five hundred years of Christian influence. As an old Laguna woman has said in reference to these matters in the long ago, "We were very careless about such things then."

Actually, the legitimacy of motherhood was determined by its very existence. A woman who gave birth was a mother as long as she had a living child, and the source of a household's legitimacy was its very existence. American Indians were and are very mystical, but they were and are a very practical people.

While there can be little question about the fact that most women married, perhaps several times, it is important to remember that tribal marriages bore little resemblance to Western concepts of that institution. Much that has been written about marriage as practiced among American Indians is wrong.

Among many tribes divorce was an easy matter for both women and men, and movement of individuals from one household to another was fluid and essentially unconstrained. There are many exceptions to this, for the tribes were distinct social groups; but many had patterns that did not use sexual constraint as a means of social control. Within such systems, individual action was believed to be directed by Spirits (through dreams, visions, direct encounter, or possession of power objects such as stones, shells, masks, or fetishes). In this context it is quite possible that Lesbianism was practiced rather commonly, as long as the individuals cooperated with the larger social customs. Women were generally constrained to have children, but in many tribes, child-bearing meant empowerment. It was the passport to maturity and inclusion in woman-culture. An important point is that women who did not have children because of constitutional, personal, or Spirit-directed disinclination had other ways to experience Spirit instruction and stabilization, and to exercise power.

"Family" did not mean what is usually meant by that term in the modern world. One's family might have been defined in biological terms as those to whom one was blood-kin. More often it was defined by other considerations; spiritual kinship was at least as important a factor as "blood." Membership in a certain clan related one to many people in very close ways, though the biological connection might be so distant as to be practically nonexistent. This facet of familial ordering has been much obscured by the presence of white Christian influence and its New Testament insistence that the term "family" refers to mother, father and children, and those others who are directly related to mother and father. In this construct, all persons who can point to common direct-line ancestors are in some sense related, though the individual's distance from that

ancestor will determine the "degree" of relationship to other descendants of that ancestor.

Among many American Indians, family is a matter of clan membership. If clan membership is determined by your mother, and if your father has a number of wives, you are not related to the children of his other wives unless they themselves happen to be related to your mother. So half-siblings in the white way might be unrelated in an Indian way. Or in some tribes, the children of your mother's sister might be considered siblings, while those of your father's brother would be the equivalent of cousins. These distinctions should demonstrate that the concept of *family* can mean something very different to an Indian than it does to a non-Indian.

A unified household is one in which the relationships among women and their descendants and sisters are ordered. A split household is one in which this is not the case. A community, then, is an ordering of sister-relationships which determine who can depend on whom for what. Male relationships are ordered in accordance with the maternal principle; a male's spiritual and economic placement and the attendant responsibilities are determined by his membership in the community of sisterhood. A new acquaintance in town might be asked, "Who is your mother?" The answer identifies the person and determines the ensuing relationship between the questioner and the newcomer.

Again, community in the non-Indian modern world tends to mean people who occupy a definable geographical area and/or who share a culture (life-style) or occupation. It can extend to mean people who share an important common interest—political, avocational, or spiritual. But "community" in the American Indian world can mean those who are of a similar clan and Spirit; those who are encompassed by a particular Spirit-being are members of a community. In fact, this was the meaning most often given to the concept in traditional tribal cultures. So it was not impossible that members of a community could have been a number of women who "belonged" to a given medicine society, or who were alike in that they shared consciousness of a certain Spirit.

III. Women and Power

Any discussion of the status of women in general, and of Les-

bians in particular, cannot hope for accuracy if one misunderstands women's power in tribal societies. It is clear, I think, that the ground we are here exploring is obscure: women in general have not been taken seriously by ethnographers or folklorists, and what explorations have been done have been distorted by the preconceptions foisted on us by a patriarchal world-view, in which Lesbians are said not to exist, and women are perceived as oppressed, burdened, and powerless.

In her discussion of the "universal" devaluation of women, Sherry Ortner, for example, cites the Crow, a matrilineal American Indian tribe which placed women rather high in their culture. Ortner points to the fact that Crow women were nevertheless required to ride "inferior" horses during menstruation, and were prohibited from participating in ceremonies during their periods. She cites anthropologist Robert Lowie who reported that Crow women were forbidden to open one particular medicine bundle which "took precedence not only of other dolls but of all other Crow medicines whatsoever."¹² Ortner marshalls this and other impressive evidence to support her claim that Crow women were believed to be inferior to men. But I suspect that the vital question is not whether women have been universally devalued, but when and how and why this came about. I further suspect that this devaluation has resulted from the power which women are perceived to have, and that evidence supporting this contention is at least as massive as the evidence of our ignominy.

Ortner again cites Lowie, who wrote: "Women. . . [during menstruation] formerly rode inferior horses and evidently this loomed as a source of contamination, for they were not allowed to approach either a wounded man or men starting on a war party."¹³ Ortner continues in this vein, concluding that women are devalued even among the matrilineal Crow, because menstruation is seen as "a threat to warfare, one of the most valued institutions of the tribe, one that is central to their self-definition. . . ."¹⁴

Ortner apparently follows Lowie in assuming that menstruation was perceived as dirty and contaminating by tribal people, and that they saw it in the same light in which it was viewed by patriarchal peoples. Thus, she concludes that the Crow prohibited women at prescribed times from certain activities because of a belief that menstruation is unclean. The truth of the matter is quite different. Tribal people view menstruation as a "medicine" of such power that it can cause the death of certain people, i.e., men on the eve of combat.

Menstruating (or any other) Crow women do not go near a particularly sacred medicine bundle, and menstruating women are not allowed among warriors getting ready for battle, or those who have been wounded, because women are perceived to be possessed of a singular power, most vital during menstruation, puberty, and pregnancy, that weakens men's powers—physical, spiritual, or magical. The Crow and other American Indians do not perceive signs of womanness as contamination; rather they view them as so powerful that other “medicines” may be cancelled by the very presence of that power.

The Oglala Holy Man John Lame Deer has commented that the Oglalas do not view menstruation, which they call *isnati* (dwelling alone), as “something unclean or to be ashamed of.” Rather it was something sacred; a girl's first period was greeted by celebration. “But,” he continues, “we thought that menstruation had a strange power that could bring harm under some circumstances. This power could work in some cases against the girl, in other cases against somebody else. . . .”¹⁵

Lois Paul has found similar notions in the context of a peasant culture. In her essay “Work and Sex in a Guatemalan Village,” she discusses the power that menstruation, pregnancy and menarche are believed to possess. She notes the belief of the peasant Pedranos (in Guatemala) that menstruating women can seriously impair a man's health, or even kill him by stepping over him or putting menstrual blood in his food.¹⁶

Power, among tribal people, is not perceived as political or economic, though status and material possessions can and often do derive from it. Power is conceived of as being supernatural and paranormal. It is a matter of spirit, involvement, and destiny. Woman's power comes automatically, hers by virtue of her femaleness, her natural and necessary fecundity, and her personal acquaintance with blood. The Arapaho felt that dying in war and dying in childbirth were of the same level of spiritual accomplishment. In fact, there are suggestions in the literature on ritualism and tribal ceremony that warriors and male initiates into medicine societies gain their supernatural powers by imitating ritually the processes that women undergo naturally.

The power of women can only be controlled and directed by other women, who necessarily possess equal power. A woman who is older is more cognizant of what that power entails, the kinds of

destruction it can cause, and the ways in which it can be directed and used for good. Thus, adolescent women are placed under the care of older women, and are trained in manners and customs of modesty so that their powers will not result in harm to themselves or the larger community. Usually, a woman who has borne a child becomes an initiate into the mysteries of womanhood, and if she develops virtues and abilities beyond those automatically conferred on her by her nature, she becomes a medicine woman. Often, the medicine woman knows of her destiny in early childhood; such children are watched very carefully so that they will be able to develop in the way ordained for them by the Spirits. Often these children are identified by excessive "sickliness," which leads them to be more reflective than other children and which often necessitates the added vigilance of adults around them.

Eventually, these people will enter into their true profession. How and when they do so will vary tribe by tribe, but they will probably be well into their maturity before they will be able to practice. The Spirit or Spirits who teach and guide them in their medicine work will not appear for them until they have stabilized. Their health will usually improve, and their hormone-enzyme fluctuations will be regularized. Very often this stabilization will occur in the process of childbearing and nursing, and this is one reason why women usually are not fully accepted as part of the woman's community until after the birth of a first child. Maternity was a concept that went far beyond the simple biological sense of the word. It was the prepotent power, the basic right to control and distribute goods because it was the primary means of producing them. And it was the perfect sign of right spirit-human relationship. Among some modern American Indians this principle is still accepted. The Keres, for example, still recognize the Deity as female, and She is known as Thought Woman, for it is understood that the primary creative force is Thought.

As Leslie Silko of Laguna put it in opening her novel *Ceremony*:

Ts'its'tse'nako, Thought-Woman,
is sitting in her room
and whatever she thinks about
appears.

She thought of her sisters,
Nau'ts'ity'i and I'tcts'ity'i,
and together they created the Universe
this world
and the four worlds below.

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things
and as she named them
they appeared.¹⁷

Women have great power that is unique to them. This power must be carefully controlled lest it upset the tribal appcart. This concept concerning the supernatural power of women has undergone changes since contact. At Zuni and Hopi, for example, the Deity, who was once perceived as female, has been seen as male in recent times, having passed through a phase of androgyny.¹⁸ The Deity at Laguna, Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman, has two "descendants" or "sisters," Nau'ts'ity and I'tcts'ity'i. Somewhere along in the Myth of Creation, I'tcts'ity'i, referred to as "she," is suddenly referred to as "he." An interesting parallel occurs within the Pueblo religious structure, where the Cacique/Hochin is (or are) always referred to as *yaya*, mother, though a male always holds these positions. Yet the title derives from Iyeticico, Beautiful Corn Woman, who is our mother. Iyeticico returned to *Shipap* because of the men's disobedience. She didn't exactly abandon her children, but she removed herself from their presence, leaving with them her symbol and link, *Iariku*, "corn mother," and the protection of the *cacique*. At least, that's how the current story goes. One suspects that Iyeticico didn't leave—that she was abandoned. The men's disobedience led to some disastrous consequences; perhaps the most disastrous (and least talked about) consequence was the increase in violence toward Keres women as the Keres tribes have moved from the rule of Iyeticico to the patriarchy.

IV. Lesbians in Tribal Life

Lesbianism and homosexuality were probably commonplace among the old Indians. But the word Lesbian, when applied to traditional Indian culture, does not have the same meanings that it conveys today. The concepts are so dissimilar as to make ludicrous

attempts to relate the long-ago women who dealt exclusively with women on sexual-emotional and spiritual bases to modern women who have in common an erotic attraction for other women.

This is not to make light of the modern Lesbian, but rather to convey some sense of the enormity of the cultural gulf that we must confront and come to terms with when examining any phenomenon related to the American Indian. The modern Lesbian sees herself as distinct from "society." She may be prone to believe herself somehow out of sync with "normal" women, and often suffers great anguish at perceived differences. And while many modern Lesbians have come to see themselves as singular but not sick, many of us are not that secure in our self-assessment. Certainly, however we come to terms with our sexuality, we are not in the position of our American Indian fore-sister who could find safety and security in her bond with another woman because it was perceived to be destined and nurtured by non-human entities, and was therefore acceptable and respectable (albeit, perhaps terrifying) to others in her tribe.

Simple reason dictates that Lesbians did exist in tribal cultures, for they exist now. Because they were tribal people, the terms on which they existed must have been suited to the terms of tribal existence. And women were not perceived to be powerless; their power was great and was perceived to be great by women and men.

Spheres of influence and activity in American Indian cultures were largely divided between the sexes: there were women—goddesses, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, shamans, healers, prophets and daughters; and there were men—gods, fathers, uncles, shamans, healers, diviners, brothers, sons. What went on in one group was often unknown to the other.

There were points of confluence, of course, such as in matters pertaining to mundane survival; family-band-clan groups interacted in living arrangements, in the procurement or production of food, weaponry, clothing, and living space, and in political function. Men and women got together at certain times to perform social and ceremonial rituals, or to undertake massive tasks such as hunts, harvests, or wars. There were certain reciprocal tasks they performed for one another. But in terms of any real sense of community, there were women and there were men.

In such circumstances, Lesbianism and homosexuality were

probably commonplace. Indeed, same-sex relationships may have been the norm for primary pair-bonding. Families did not consist of traditional nuclear units in any sense. There were clans and bands or villages, but the primary personal unit tended to include members of one's own sex rather than members of the opposite sex.

Women spent a great deal of time together, outside the company of men. Together they spent weeks in menstrual huts; together women tilled their fields, harvested wild foods and herbs, ground grains, prepared skins, smoked or dried foodstuffs, and just visited. Women spent long periods together in their homes and lodges while the men stayed in mens' houses or in the woods, or were out on hunting or fishing expeditions. Young women were often separated from the larger groups for periods of months or years, as were young men. It seems likely that a certain amount of sexual activity ensued. It is questionable whether these practices would be identified as Lesbian by the politically radical Lesbian community of today; for while sex between women probably occurred regularly, women also regularly married and raised children—often adopting children if they did not have any. There were exceptions to this rule. The Objibway, for example, recorded several examples of women who lived alone by choice. These women are not said to have lived with other women; they lived alone, maintaining themselves and shunning human society.

The women who shared their lives with women did, as a matter of course, follow the usual custom of marrying. The duration of marriage and the bonding style of marriage differed among tribes. Many peoples practiced serial monogamy; others acknowledged the marriage bond but engaged in sexual activities outside of it. Adultery was not a generally recognized concept in American Indian cultures, although some tribes did punish severely a woman who "transgressed" the marriage bond. Among many tribes paternity was not very important; one was identified by the identity of the mother and her clan. This practice was widespread in North America at the time of contact and today persists in many regions, including the southwestern United States.

Because traditional American Indian women spent the preponderance of their time with women, and because attitudes toward sex were very different from modern Western views, it is likely, in my opinion, that Lesbianism was an integral part of American Indian life. This seems reasonable given the fact that Lesbianism is a widespread practice even in cultures which have more rigid notions about "appropriate" sexual and bonding behavior. However, relationships among women

did not depend only on opportunity. Lesbianism must be viewed in the context of the spiritual orientation of tribal life.

The prototypical relationship in this sphere was that of sister to sister. Silko makes this apparent in her account of Indian myth: Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman, thought of her sisters, and together they created the Universe, this world and the four worlds below. This concept posits that the original household, the proto-community, was founded on sisterhood. It was based on the power of Creative Thought, and it was that Thought—of three sisters, united—which gave rise to all creation.

It may be possible to distinguish between those women who took advantage of the abundant opportunities to form erotic bonds with other women, and those women whose relationships with women were as much a matter of Spirit-direction as of personal preference (though the two were one in some senses).

It might be that some American Indian women could be seen as “dykes,” while some could be seen as “Lesbians,” if you think of “dyke” as one who bonds with women in order to further some Spirit and supernatural directive, and “Lesbian” as a woman who is emotionally and physically intimate with other women. (The two groups would not have been mutually exclusive.)

The “dyke” (we might also call her a “ceremonial Lesbian”) was likely to have been a medicine woman in a special sense. She probably was a participant in the Spirit (intelligence, force-field) of an Entity or Deity who was particularly close to earth during the Goddess period (though that Deity is still present in the lives of some American Indian women who practice Her ceremonies and participate actively and knowingly in Her reality). Signs of this Deity remain scattered all over the continent: Snake Mound in Ohio is probably one such holdover. La Virgen de Guadalupe is another. There are all sorts of petroglyphs, edifices, and stories concerning some aspect of Her, and Her signs are preserved in much of the lore and literature of many tribes.

American Indian tradition holds that one who is chosen/directed by the Spirits for a particular task must carry out that task. Whoever does not do so is subject to physical and/or psychological destruction. This is not, by the way, because Spirits are naturally vindictive, but rather because it is the nature of supernatural/paranormal power to

act; if it is denied proper expression, it will express inappropriately, and this might (and often does) result in dire events to the chosen one, her loved ones and/or her people.

Essentially, the way is dependent on the kind of power the woman possesses, the kind of Spirit to whom she is attached, and the tribe to which she belongs. Her initiation will take the course that that of males takes: she will be required to pass grueling physical tests; she will be required to lose her mundane persona and transform her soul and mind into other forms. She will be required to follow the lead of Spirits and to carry out the tasks they assign her. For a description of one such rite, Fr. Bernard Haile's translation and notes on the Navajo Beautyway/Nightchant is instructive. Such stories abound in the lore and literature of the American Indian people.¹⁹ They all point to a serious event which results in the death of the protagonist, her visit to the Spirit realms from which she finally returns, transformed and powerful. After such events, she no longer belongs to her tribe or family, but to the Spirit teacher who instructed her. This makes her seem "strange" to many of her folk, and, indeed, she may be accused of witchcraft, though that is more likely to be charged at present than it was in days gone by. (I might note here that among American Indians men are often accused of the same thing. Tales of evil sorcerers abound; in fact, in my reading, they seriously outnumber the tales about sorceresses.)

The Lakota have a word for some of these women, *kōskalaka*, which is translated as "young man," and "woman who doesn't want to marry." I would guess that its proper translation is "Lesbian" or, colloquially, "dyke." These women are said to be the daughters (the followers/practitioners) of *wiya numpa* or Doublewoman. Doublewoman is a Spirit/Divinity who links two women together making them one in Her power. They do a dance in which a rope is twined between them and coiled to form a "rope baby."²⁰ The exact purpose or result of this dance is not mentioned, but its significance is clear. In a culture that values children and women because they bear them, two women who don't want to marry (a man) become united by the power of *wiya numpa* and their union is validated ("legitimized," in Malinowski's sense) by the creation of a rope baby. That is, the rope baby signifies the potency of their union in terms that are comprehensible to their society, which therefore legitimizes it.

It is clear that the *kōskalaka* are perceived as powerful, as are their presumed male counterparts, the *winkte*. But their power does

not constitute the right “to determine her own and others’ actions” as Jane Fishburne Collier defines the concept.²¹ Rather, it consists of the ability to manipulate physical and non-physical reality toward certain ends. When this power is used to determine others’ actions, it at least borders on “black magic” or sorcery.

To clarify the nature of the power I am talking about, let us look briefly at what Lame Deer has to say about the *winkte*. Lame Deer is inclined to speak rather directly, and tends not to romanticize either the concept of power as it is understood and practiced by his people, or the *winkte* as a person who has certain abilities that make him special.

He says that a *winkte* is a person who is a half-man and half-woman, perhaps even a hermaphrodite with both male and female organs. In the old days, *winktes* dressed like women and lived as women. Lame Deer admits that though the Lakotas thought people are what nature, or dreams, make them, still men weren’t happy to see their sons running around with *winktes*. Still, he says that there are good men among the *winktes*, and that they have special powers. He took Richard Erdoes (who was transcribing his conversation for their book, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*) with him to a bar to interview a *winkte*. He asked the man to tell him all about *winktes*, and the *winkte* told Lame Deer that “a *winkte* has a gift of prophecy and that he himself could predict the weather.” The Lakota go to a *winkte* for a secret name, and such names carry great power, though they are often off-color. “You don’t let a stranger know [the secret name],” he says. “He would kid you about it.”²² A *winkte*’s power to name often won the *winkte* great fame, and usually a fine gift as well.

The power referred to here is magical, mysterious and sacred. That does not mean that its possessors are to be regarded as a priestly-pious people, for this is hardly the case. But it does mean that those who possess “medicine power” are to be treated with a certain cautious respect.

It is interesting to note that the story—one of the few reliable accounts of persons whose sexual orientation differs from the heterosexual—concerns a male, a *winkte*. The stories about *kōskalaka* are yet to be told. It seems to me that this suppression is a result of a series of coincidental factors: the historical events connected with the conquest of Native America; the influence of Christianity and the attendant brutal suppression of medicine people and medicine

practices; the patriarchal suppression of all references to power held by women; Christian notions of "proper" sexual behavior; and, recently, a deliberate attempt on the part of American Indian men to suppress all knowledge among their own people of the traditional place of women as powerful medicine people and leaders in their own right. The medicine-Lesbian (to coin a term) has become anathema; her presence must remain hidden until all power she held has been totally blanketed by silence. It is to prevent what I believe to be a serious tragedy that this article is being written. We must not allow this conspiracy of silence to prevent us from discovering who we have been and who we are. We must not forget the true source of our being, nor its powerfulness, and we must not allow ourselves to be deluded by patriarchal perceptions of power which inexorably rob us of our true power. As Indian women, as Lesbians, we must make the effort to understand clearly what is at stake, and this means that we must reject all beliefs that work against ourselves, however much we have come to cherish them as we have lived among the patriarchs.

V. Conclusion

Womanculture is unregulated by males, and is misperceived by ethnographers. Perhaps this is so because it is felt—at least among ethnographers' tribal informants—that it is wise to let "sleeping dogs lie." There may also be fear of what power might be unleashed if the facts about American Indian Lesbianism were discussed directly. A story that has recently come to my attention might best clarify this statement.

Two white Lesbians, feminists and social activists, were determined to expand their activities beyond the Lesbian and Feminist communities, and to this end became involved in an ecological movement that centered on American Indian concerns. In pursuit of this course, they invited a Sioux medicine man to join them, and arranged to pick him up from the small rural town he was visiting. When he saw them, he accused them of being Lesbians, and became very angry. He abused them verbally, in serious and obscene terms. They left him where he was and returned home, angry and confused.

A certain amount of their confusion was a result of their misperception of Indians and of this particular medicine man. I have friends in the primarily white Lesbian community who seem to think that Indian men, particularly medicine men, are a breed apart who

are “naturally just.” Like other Americans, Indians are inclined to act in ways that are consistent with their picture of the world, and, in this particular Indian’s picture, the world was not big enough for Lesbians. The women didn’t announce their sexual preference to him, by the way; but he knew a *kōskalaka* when he saw one, and reacted accordingly.

A friend who knew the women involved asked me about this encounter. She couldn’t understand why the medicine man acted the way he had. I suspect that he was afraid of the Lesbian’s power, and I told her that. An American Indian woman to whom I recounted the story had the same reaction. *Kōskalaka* have singular power, and this medicine man was undoubtedly aware of it. The power of the *koskalaka* can (potentially, at least) override that of men, even very powerful medicine men such as the one in my story. I know this particular man, and he is quite powerful as a medicine man.

Not so long ago, the American Indians were clearly aware of the power that women possessed. Even now there are those among traditionals (those who follow the old ways) who know the medicine power of women. This is why a clear understanding of the supernatural forces and their potential in our lives is necessary. More than an interesting tour through primitive exotica is to be gained.

Before we worry about collecting more material from aborigines, before we join forces with those who are in a position to destroy us, and before we decide, like Sherry Ortner, that belief in ancient matriarchal civilization is an irrational concept born of conjecture and wish, let us adjust our perspective to match that of our foresters. Then, when we search the memories and lore of tribal peoples, we might be able to see what eons and all kinds of institutions have conspired to hide from our eyes.

The evidence is all around us. It remains for us to *discover* what it means.

NOTES

¹ I use the term American Indian, rather than Native American. While Native American was the usage introduced on college campuses in the Sixties and Seventies, American Indian is the preferred term of Indian communities and organizations.

² Jonathan Katz, in *Gay American History* (New York: Crowell, 1976), included a chapter on “Native Americans/Gay Americans, 1528-1976”

(pp. 281-334). Fourteen entries in that chapter relate to women. Several of these refer to Indian women who dressed in male clothing. Others cite studies or accounts of the Kutenai Indians (Claude E. Schaeffer, 1811), the Mohave (George Devereux, 18??), the Crow (Edwin T. Denig, 1855-56), the Klamath (Leslie Spier, 1930), the Yuma (C. Daryll Forde, 1931), and the Kaska (J.J. Honigmann, 1964) which document or suggest the existence of Lesbian relationships. Other entries cite Indian legends involving Lesbian relationships.

³ Frederick Manfred, *The Manly-Hearted Woman* (New York: Bantam, 1978).

⁴ Hamilton A. Tyler, *Pueblo Gods and Myths* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. 116-124.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this, see Anthony Wallace, *The Life and Death of the Seneca* (New York: 1969), and "The Law of the Great Peace of the People of the Longhouse [Iroquois]" and "Now This Is Gaiwiio," in *Literature of the American Indian*, Thomas Sanders and Walter Peek, eds. (New York: Glencoe Press, 1973).

⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex, Culture, and Myth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 12.

⁷ Malinowski, p. 12.

⁸ Malinowski, p. 12.

⁹ Malinowski, p. 13.

¹⁰ Malinowski, p. 13.

¹¹ Malinowski, p. 13.

¹² Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture," in *Woman, Culture and Society*, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 65-71.

¹³ Ortner, p. 70.

¹⁴ Ortner, p. 70.

¹⁵ John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions: The Life of a Sioux Medicine Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone Books, 1972), pp. 148-149.

¹⁶ Lois Paul, "Work and Sex in a Guatemalan Village," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, pp. 293-298. Paul's article discusses these concepts in a peasant culture, that is, one which exists in an agricultural, pastoral environment, and whose social structure is based on perceived relationship to the land. This type of culture occupies a niche which might be thought of as halfway between industrial, urban people and tribal, Spirit-centered people.

¹⁷ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 1.

¹⁸ Anthony Purley, "Keres Pueblo Concepts of Deity," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1974, I:1), pp. 28-30.

¹⁹ See John Bierhorst, ed., *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature: Quetzal coatl/The Ritual of Condolence/Cuceb/The Night Chant* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974). Fr. Haile's work is included in Leland C. Wyman, ed., *Beautyway: A Navajo Ceremonial* (New York: Bollingen Series LIII-Pantheon Books, 1975).

²⁰ Elaine A. Jahner and J. DeMollie, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, Part III, "Narratives" (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

²¹ Jane Fishburne Collier, "Women in Politics," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, p. 90.

²² Lame Deer, p. 150.

²³ Joan Bamberger, "The Myths of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, pp. 260-271.