Yesterday and Today: An Examination of the Assiniboine, Hopi, and Seneca Tribes’ Use of Ceremonial and Traditional Regalia

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ABSTRACT

This essay serves as an introduction to the traditional and ceremonial regalia worn by men and women of the Assiniboine, Hopi, and Seneca tribes. Specifically, attention will be given to their use of beadwork, fabrics, skins and pelts, and paints, and also, how and what the materials signify to each of these tribal peoples. Questions are considered: Why and when certain items are worn? What types of regalia are to be worn for different ceremonies? And how and in what ways Native American Peoples traditionally utilized beading on regalia? Ultimately, this essay is intended to provide the reader a better understanding of the different forms and purposes of regalia worn by both men and women of the Assiniboine, Hopi, and Seneca tribal cultures.
Assiniboine regalia featured applied ornamental beading. Women’s regalia was adorned with shells, beads, animal teeth, and porcupine quills. The Assiniboine culture also used human hair that was attached to porcupine quills and then beaded onto the garment as dangles or affixed to hem lines of shirts, dresses, leggings, moccasins, and their hooded coats called a capote. In Assiniboine culture “regalia was highly regarded and used not only for wear but for trade. The more beading and detail [on an article of regalia] the higher the trade value” (DeMallie, 583). For example, “A fully detailed set of ceremonial regalia made from animal skins including human hair was valued the same as a horse. If the set included ermine skins, the value doubled. Typically, a horse was valued at ten buffalo hides” (583).

Women constructed their regalia from tanned buffalo or cowhide and wore short leggings made of elk hide reaching to mid-calf. Men’s regalia consisted of breechclouts, leggings and shirts. Both genders wore moccasins made from rawhide with buckskin soles while buffalo hair was used as insulation and warmth during the winter. Post-European contact regalia continued to be made in traditional styles with the biggest change being that the tribes began to utilize cotton, muslin, velvet, and wool fabrics to create their ensembles. Additionally, fabrics acquired through trade and decorated with beaded strips were used as both blankets and fashioned into coats (583).

Assiniboine ceremonial regalia were made of the finest skins and fabrics and included exquisite ornamentation for Assiniboine tribal peoples. Working with hand-honed beads made from stones, bones, and shells in the early years, and in the post contact period, Assiniboine artists created unique masterpieces from glass trade beads. Women primary completed the beading continuing an age-old tradition of creating pictures. Beads of all sizes were used to create figurative or geometric designs that inspired warriors or conveyed symbolic and ritual significance for the Assiniboine’s connection to animal spirits such as eagles, buffalo, and horses. Beads were sewn on by hand, tacking into place with an anchoring stitch after each grouping of five beads. Today, glass beads are still made in traditional styles and genders wore moccasins made from rawhide with buckskin soles while buffalo hair was used as insulation and warmth during the winter.

Native American groups. For the general days Indians utilized regalia as part of ceremonial occasions. Articles of regalia depict the symbolic and spiritual connections of a tribe’s culture. This essay presents a closer examination of the Assiniboine, Hopi and Seneca regalia in order to more clearly understand the general significance or importance of regalia to Native American groups.

Assiniboine

Assiniboine regalia are an integral component of this tribe’s culture. The Assiniboine people who are known by a few names (Stoney, Red Bottom, and Nakona) rejected European clothing in the early years after European contact. However, they did adopt the trade-cloth fabrics for summer wear in later years. For now, emphasis will be on the Assiniboine use of animal skins. Prior to European contact regalia consisted primarily of elk, deer, buffalo, and the fur of small game such as rabbit and beaver. Wasting any part of an animal was frowned upon. Thus, all organs and outer skins were used to make clothing, as food containers, for holding water, and as tepees for housing. Preparation of skins was completed with great care, and they accorded respect for the animal whose life had been taken— a task completed by the women of the tribe. The women removed the hides from the animal in two pieces by carving along the backbone then along the belly (Miller). In the case of buffalo hides, after drying them for three days the women would then sew the two pieces together for tepees or use on travois sleds. Smaller game such as, deer and elk, were used to make clothing, as they had a softer feel when worn next to the skin.

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that, took her ten months, working every day for 16 hours a day to complete. She said she felt her ancestors beading along with her” (Blumberg).

Assiniboine artisans favored geometric designs. Interestingly, “facial tattoos were part of a ceremonial tradition for young girls 12 to 14 years of age, or upon reaching puberty. Facial tattoo designs were geometric and included one round spot on the forehead and two lines, one on each side of the mouth starting from the corner of the mouth down, and one at the center of the mouth down” (DeMallie, 583). Likewise, many women tribal members would decorate their wrists and upper arms with band style rings. These designs were considered part of a beauty process for the women. Men were rarely tattooed, and to be tattooed required a man having counted coup against an enemy. “Masculine tattoos were much larger and involved a full chest area and both arms” (583).

Assiniboine headpieces were cap-like structures. Feathers were used to cover the cap area and often animal antlers or buffalo horns were attached. These were similar in style to the Seneca Indian headdress. Beaded strands and ribbons dangled down from each side of the cap. Men’s headdresses and still are much more ornate than the women’s. A woman’s headdress consisted of one feather with a strand of beads clipped or tied into the women’s hair.

Today, the Nakoda, Stoney or more commonly identified by the name Assiniboine, are active participants on the Plains powwow circuit. Culturally speaking, powwow regalia is by tradition, ornate, and specific to the person who is performing. The so-called “powwow circuit” is a very active means for keeping Assiniboine tribal traditions alive (Miller). Rose Red Elk, or as she is known professionally as Red Feather Woman, is a story-teller who travels the world demonstrating what real Indian customs, culture, and regalia are truly like. “Sponsored by the U.S. State Department Red Feather Woman has visited many countries including Turkey and Pakistan” (Elk). In doing so, Red Feather Woman shares the oral history and traditions of Assiniboine culture through her story telling.

Hopi

Historically, the Hopi have lived in the Southwestern United States, and currently reside in what is now Arizona. In their language, the Hopi are known as the “Peaceful People” (Hodge). Before European contact, the Hopi used animal skins like other tribes. However, the Hopi also had a tradition of creating woven blankets and other garments. Unlike the Assiniboine, the men completed the weaving. Weaving was an important part of the Hopi economic system in addition to farming and manufacturing jewelry made from silver ore and turquoise stones. Items woven by Hopi men were designed with a “Balance of size and shapes” (Native People A-Z). Traditional women’s regalia consisted of simple wrap dresses made from dark colored woven fabrics such as cotton or wool fastened into place with intricately woven belts used to cinch the wrap. Some dresses were trimmed with colored cloth or ribbons. A mantle or shawl was worn over one’s shoulder and was typically made from calico fabric with colored trim. Embroidery and woven fabrics were more common for Hopi culture. Women also adorned their ears with ear pendants. Ear jewelry was in the form of a wooden disc decorated with turquoise and mosaic patterns.

Hopi men wore calico shirts, breechcloths and leggings. Similarly, the Hopi men wore jewelry that was made locally in the community. Bracelets of shell, turquoise, or silver; along with earrings of the same material were part of both men and women’s tribal regalia. Both genders wore moccasins that were made from animal skins. In Hopi culture decorating the body using pigments such as paint was more commonly reserved for ceremonies as opposed to everyday life. A Hopi woman’s hair was an explicit way to distinguish her eligibility for marriage, from those already married. Married women wore their hair down in two rolled pigtails or in loose braids. Unmarried women split their hair parted to either side, then, wrapped the two pieces into what is still called “squash blossoms” above the ears. The squash blossom represents fertility in the Hopi culture (Hodge). Elaborate headdresses were part of the traditional regalia worn by Hopi men, but varied by clan or family unit and ceremony (Hodge; Native Civilizations: Siouian).
Today, Hopi traditions of weaving and the making of silver and turquoise jewelry continue to be the center of the artistic nature. There are multiple websites extolling the culture and traditions of the “Peaceful People” and for marketing their handmade jewelry, blankets and clothing. Traditional patterns and colors remain important to the modern day Hopi artisan. Geometric designs in the form of zigzag lines or lightning bolt shapes are often the predominant patterns used in Hopi woven blankets. Research suggests that yellow, blue, black, red, and white are the most common colors used in Hopi regalia and craftwork. Like the Assiniboine, the Hopi tribe is active on the Powwow Circuit. Likewise, multiple websites, emphasizing Hopi language revitalization provide visitors and tribal members alike easy access to modern Hopi interests. Unfortunately, in modern Hopi Society, the loom-work products, once created by their male ancestors, has been almost completely lost (Hartman, 1996). Through educational programs, the Hopi Nation addresses the loss of historically important cultural practices. Progress has been made by training the tribe’s youth with hopes of revitalizing their weaving traditions. Hopi schools are now providing opportunities for this purpose.

Seneca

The Third and final tribe discussed in this essay is the Seneca Nation. Historically, during the pre-contact years Seneca Indian regalia consisted of buckskin and fur pieces. Thus, taking an animal life meant using all parts of the animal so as not to insult the spirit of the animal or the creator. To the Seneca all living things, plants, insects and animals included, had a soul and each soul was, and still is, respected. Traditional Seneca regalia consisted of robes, leggings, shirts, skirts and dresses. Customarily, men wore wrap style shirts which extended to the knee. Breechcloths were secured in place by belts and leggings which rose to mid-thigh and were tied with straps of leather or woven fabrics. Items of regalia were made mostly of buckskin and other animal pelts during winter months. Like other groups “post contact styles remained the same at first but eventually European influences started to appear.” However, “the overall integrity of the Seneca cultural designs remained intact for ceremonies” (National Museum of the American Indian Guide for Educators). The introduction of fabrics caused the most significant change. As such, with access to Calico prints, velvet, wool and broadcloth goods through trade, their use, of glass beads and silver became popular. Since their earliest contact with the Europeans, the Seneca’s use of colorful ribbon, embroidery and beading for trim on garments has remained very important to the individual (National Museum of the American Indian Guide for Educators).

Headdresses used by the Seneca were not of the style that most people consider traditionally used by Plains Native Americans. Instead, the Seneca headdresses were and still are very specific to each individual. Gustowehs, as these headdresses are called, are still made by hand, with a framework of black ash splint straps held together with sinew. This frame is then covered with a durable piece of buckskin or sturdy fabric (Kanatiiosh). It is common practice that the bottom horizontal band fitting around the head is decorated with Seneca clan symbols. These are: the Deer, Hawk, Heron, Snipe, and Turtle, Beaver, Wolf, and Bear clans. Historically, clans were, and still are, family units including extended family members. The Seneca’s construction of Gustowehs consists of a cap like structure fitted over the frame, completely covered in feathers of hawk, pheasant or turkey making a dense semi-circular headdress. One upright standing Eagle feather is attached at the crown of the Gustoweh. Each feather grouping is sewn in place and attached by hand, with sinew. It is important to note that within the Iroquois Confederacy every tribe of Iroquois (Seneca, Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Oneida and Tuscarora) has a different number of feather positions on their Gustoweh. Beading, silver work ornamentation and hair are components completing the construction of their headdresses.

Additional embellishments found on Seneca Gustowehs include deer antlers; however, these are only worn for special ceremonial occasions. Women’s headpieces can be best described as a headband covered in beadwork. This is accomplished by attaching small seed beads that line the bottom edge of the headband producing a delicate and colorful effect, much like a lace border.

Today, traditional-style regalia is worn for ceremonies and special occasions (Kanatiiosh). For day-to-day apparel, modern members dress as non-
Seneca; however, many express their Seneca ancestry by wearing beaded necklaces, bracelets, or hair adornments. Presently, the wearing of traditional regalia is reserved for ceremonial occasions and for teaching the next generation the traditional and sacred practices of the Seneca people.

Native use of Beading

As presented above beading is an expressive art form, having a long tradition and history among the Assiniboine, Hopi, and Seneca tribes. Prior to contact with the Europeans, beads were made primarily from shells that were acquired through trade with other tribes. Later, the Europeans offered a most prized item of trade glass beads. The patterns, images, colors, and symbols found in American Indian beadwork and still used today in the creation of regalia, represent each tribe’s ancestral heritage. People, places, animals, and spirits are all included in their respective designs.

The focus of this essay has been to describe a small portion of the regalia used by the Assiniboine, Hopi, and Seneca tribes both historically and today. Colors used on most Assiniboine, Hopi, and Seneca regalia is based on each tribe’s sacred beliefs. The use of animal hides for clothing, beading, and painting is a traditional art that was nearly lost. Fortunately, these traditions have not been lost or forgotten, and are being revitalized through education programs developed for the youth of their perspective tribes. Slowly but surely, the traditional methods of making and using ceremonial regalia are gaining momentum preserving for future generations their cultural significance. It is through efforts such as story telling by people like Red Feather Woman, or weaving demonstrations and educational programs conducted at Hopi reservation schools, and the efforts of tribal members at sites like Gonondagan that assure the continuing importance, significance, and use of regalia in the Assiniboine, Hopi, and Seneca societies.

Work Cited


