‘YOU’RE CONSIDERED A WARRIOR THEN’
RESPECT AND INDIVIDUALISM IN CROW MILITARY SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

For many Crows, respect and the related value of individualism are central elements in their culture and social relations. They are commonly used to comprehend and conceptualize Crow military service as an institution, giving it distinctive cultural meaning and transforming it into a part of their own tradition. The notions of respect and individualism are also reflected in the admiration of tribal veterans that has priority over any elusive political concern with the veterans’ personal achievements and their role as embodiments of tribal values. In addition, they are repeatedly employed by the Crow in discussions of military service to construct their understanding of themselves as a respectful people, as opposed to Anglo-American society. Like many other indigenous peoples, the Crow today struggle to construct their lives on their own terms, and they do this by applying their traditional values, such as respect and individualism, to interpret reality and their own identity, hence perpetuating the essence of their distinctive way of life.

Keywords: Native Americans, military service, values, respect, individualism, identity, tradition

Introduction

A Crow[1] woman in her 40s reflected on the differences between the Crow and mainstream society by saying:

> We don’t value things the same as a non-Indian. Like a lot of [white] people think that having a cell phone and credit cards [makes them happy]; and then happy for us would be our family.

The conservation of values is an important and an increasingly sensitive theme for many Native Americans today. Because much of their home territory has been lost and their way of life changed, indigenous values, or those perceived as such, are quite often what the Natives draw on to characterize themselves as separate peoples. On the Crow reservation, ‘loss of values’, next to the loss of language, is also one of the themes that most worries especially the elderly of the community.

I spent three months in the fall of 2007 on the Crow reservation in Montana, United States, studying Crow Nation veterans and their service in the US Armed Forces. During my fieldwork with the veterans, I found myself face-to-face with the theme of values. I came to see that the topic of military service was meaningful and carried great weight for many, and important tribal values were frequently associated with it. Military service, the values and meanings related to it, and questions of cultural continuity and discontinuity, became the topic of my research. Furthermore, I was interested in the ways values operate in general, not only directing ethical choices but also making life experiences understandable and giving them cultural meanings.

As my study advanced, I soon noticed that opinions on the military were not always unanimous, and depending on the perspective, the Crow often saw service in the military as contributing either to the loss or to the preservation of tribal tradition. Nonetheless, the same concepts and ideas dominated these discussions, and instead of being restricted to the topic of military service, they appeared to be relevant in other spheres of life as well. This does not mean that every Crow identified with or even conformed to them. Nevertheless, they were frequently used to interpret reality on a daily basis and recognized as significant elements in Crow culture.

In this research report, my goal is to develop a deeper understanding of two such values, respect and individualism, and how they are interrelated with the Crow tradition of military service. In addition, I explore some general tendencies in the way the Crow use these values to define themselves and to construct difference in relation to the gigantic 'Other': the neighboring Anglo-American society.

The Crow people

The Crow reservation is located in the southeastern part of the state of Montana, and with its land area of 8900km^2, it is the fifth largest reservation in the United States. Yet it is but a small part of the old homeland of the Crow, who as a nomadic tribe used to roam over a large territory covering most of the present states of Montana and Wyoming. The total population of the tribe today is more or less 11,000, of which about 75 per cent live on the reservation and in the cities nearby.

The Crow are a matrilineal tribe, and although traditionally they were divided into about thirteen exogamic clans grouped into loose phratries (Lowie 1980 [1935]: 8–9), at present the number of clans has diminished to eight: the Big Lodge, Newly Made Lodge, Greasy Mouth, Sore Lip, Whistling Water, Bad War Deeds, Ties-in-a-Bundle, and Piegan clans (Frey 1989: 40). As can be expected, they use the Crow kinship system. Similar to most Native American tribes, a large body of relatives, including adopted ones, is very important for most Crows. According to their worldview, an individual is never an autonomous or separate entity, but his identity and actions are focused on networks of social relations of which he is a part (Frey 1989: 4–5).

About 95 per cent of the Crow are said to practice some form of Christianity, and 5 per cent practice traditional Crow or Native American religion[2] though in reality these are by no means mutually exclusive and ingredients of both are often blended in people's lives. There are many different evaluations of the present number of Crows speaking their

native language as a mother tongue, but the percentage is probably anywhere between 20 and 75, depending on the generation. As in many other reservations, the youngest people are the least fluent in the language and often speak English as their mother tongue.[3]

The traditional livelihoods of raising horses and hunting are still very popular, but rarely practiced for economic benefit. Unemployment on the reservation is high, partly due to a lack of job opportunities and the fact that relatively few people have college or university degrees, although many graduate from high school. The income level is lower than that of the rest of the state of Montana, and other problems include alcoholism and drug abuse, lack of adequate housing, and extensive discrimination met in the cities outside the reservation. Partly due to the hardships of reservation life, enlisting in the military is very common. For many young Crows, military service has offered employment, but also economic relief, opportunities for study, and a way out of detrimental lifestyles. Other popular reasons for enlisting are an interest in new experiences, a sense of duty to the tribe, and family and tribal tradition. All the families have at least one veteran as a close family member, and most have quite a few, although there are no official statistics on the total number of Crow veterans. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the veteran representative of the tribe, Paul Little Light, estimated the number of Crow veterans to be from 300 to 500, which represents 3 to 5 per cent of the total Crow population. On the other hand, he admitted the number is probably too low, because many veterans do not return to the reservation after their service, and furthermore the veteran status of some is not widely known.

In the field

During my fieldwork I conducted one or more interviews with altogether 35 Crow tribal members, of whom 27 were veterans, one was recently enlisted, and the rest were family members of veterans and/or elderly people especially knowledgeable of Crow culture. The ages of the interviewees varied from 24 to 83 years of age, and nine of them were women. In addition to the interviews, I discussed my research topic with several other tribal members, who were of great help for my study and conclusions. Anonymity was assured for all informants, even though most of them did not require it.

Nearly all of the interviewees were chosen on the basis of connecting links between them and persons I knew beforehand; often I befriended a person who presented me to his veteran relatives, friends or co-workers. It was much easier to gain the trust of people as a result of already knowing someone they were familiar with, but consequently a number of the veterans interviewed were members of the same families, lived in the same communities, or worked in the same places. Another factor that affected the selection of the informants was their closeness to the community in which I lived and was most familiar with, Crow Agency, the reservation capital.

The taped and transcribed interviews form a major part of the material of the study. Some information was also collected in daily interaction and observation of reservation life, as well as in special events, most significantly in the veterans' powwow I was able to attend. In addition, many visual objects, such as campaign posters and the art at the Veterans Park in Crow Agency, have been helpful.

Respect and the value of individualism

> I was raised traditionally—basically, what life was for Indian people, I mean, respected everybody, and everything, everything was there for a reason, had a purpose. (A veteran in his 30s)

The Crow often identify respect as the most central element in their culture, and as an important part of their tribal identity (Real Bird 1997). It is manifested in numerous ways: the avoidance by a man of his mother-in-law, for example, is a self-evident, mandatory demonstration of respect. Another side of respect is generosity, which is frequently seen by the Crow as well as other Native Americans as one of the prime virtues (Bauerle 2004: 13; Fowler 1982: 275; Hoig 1992: 43). This principle is most vividly ritualized in the so-called 'giveaway-ceremony' that is held, for instance, by a returning veteran in order to give thanks and show respect to the people who have helped him. Joseph Medicine Crow (2006: 121), the Crow tribal historian, wrote about the giveaway:

> [It] is always done when someone in Crow society is honored. I know in white society when someone is honored, that person gets presents, but that is not the way it is done in Crow society. When someone succeeds, he or she gives presents to those who helped make the success possible, like parents, relatives, teachers or friends.

In the old times, a man might have given away all of his property at an event like this, which used to be considered most respectable (Marquis 1975: 153). Many Native American tribes believed that true wealth was in social relations (Real Bird 1997), and the function of property was for it to be given away (Hassrick 1975 [1964]: 36; Steiner 1968: 153). In some measure, this continues to be true, and giveaways are only one of the contemporary forms of practicing this principle that is still very vivid and relevant in the lives of the Crow.

One of the most important aspects of respect for the Native Americans in general, and for the Crow tribe in particular, is the respect for individuality (see e.g. Radin 1957 [1927]: 38; Spielmann 1998: 37). Their concept of individualism, however, is not the same as in Anglo-American culture, and it is always expected to be complementary to a deep sense of interrelatedness and social responsibility, especially with one's relatives. According to Paul Radin, the Native American respect for individuality is based on the assumption that the individual and the social group are essentially distinct entities. People are not expected to be similar, but it is thought natural for them to have different opinions and forms of expression depending on their personality. Tolerance of this kind is possible because, although the social whole and the individuals coexist and influence one another, the former is exterior to the latter in a way similar to the physical world: constantly changing but still forever remaining the same. As individuals cannot effectively alter social reality, their actions and beliefs make very little difference to the society in general (Radin 1957: 37, 42–43, 59, 79). Subsequently, everyone is seen to have a right to act on those rationales, individual or communal, that respond to their logic and interests, and they hold no responsibility for abstract ends such as the functioning of a society, or any other remote collective purpose (Sapir 1924: 411–412).

Respect for individuality means that the Native American is not 'his brother's keeper' and (at least ideally) he does not interfere with other people's decisions even when he considers they are making a mistake or acting in a non-desirable way (Basso 1996: 56; Brant in Ross 1992: 12; Radin 1957: 58; Spielmann 1998: 37; Wax and Thomas 1972: 34). Direct criticism of another person means imposing a sense of inadequacy or inferiority on him, potentially damaging his self-esteem and hampering his self-development (Ross 1992: 24). This principle affects many aspects of tribal life. On the Crow reservation, for instance, it is very common for a husband and a wife to be of different Christian congregations or even of different religions, neither one of them being apparently bothered by it; a devout Pentecostal could be married to a traditional Crow practitioner, and a Peyote ceremonial leader to an active Baptist, without any seeming conflict. There appears to be no tendency to select a partner of one's own religious affiliation, or any signs of interference in the spouse's religious practice. Instead, every individual could freely choose to practice what he or she wanted or was used to, and this was duly respected (see also Hoxie 1995: 225).

Another aspect of Native American individualism is the respect for individual performance and self-development. This is clearly seen in the context of Crow military service, which often implies the aspiration of individuals to earn respect from the community: some seek to prove their bravery, their physical and mental endurance and their manhood, while others emphasize self-sacrifice. This reflects the idea of cultural pressure on performance, on making a name. For many veterans, military experience also meant self-development: obtaining discipline, organization, responsibility and a sense of purpose—in other words it meant growing up. There was a wide agreement on the utility of military service especially for the young men of the community, and a very common sentence was, 'I think everybody should go'. Frequently the veterans felt that it was vital for the young to see life outside the home community, because by leaving the reservation they learned to live without resorting to help from their families, to do things on their own, and to 'stand up for themselves'. Interestingly, this is something that Crow males in the pre-reservation days did by going on war parties: they learned to take care of themselves and, most importantly, they became adults. An elderly Crow told me that back then 'the boys, they're not [regarded as] men before they got to go on a war party and come back. You're considered a warrior then.' Moreover, in those days, the males that preferred to stay in the camp where their families took care of them were not respected; they would never even be real men (e.g. Bauerle 2004: 89; see also Silver 1994: 8). So, going to war for the first time was actually an old Crow rite of passage[4] for the young men: it was a custom to leave the family and the camp with the age cohort, to learn skills and autonomy vital to the individual's survival, thus marking a transition point into adulthood. In a similar manner, the Crow veterans today think it is necessary for the young men to gain experience in order to become an adult and a useful member of the community, and for this the military provides an economically plausible and widely approved framework.

Although service in the military is given various personal meanings, most of them can be summarized in the idea of being able to perform in the expected way and acquiring the respect of others. This includes embodying important tribal values such as endurance and

self-sacrifice, and developing oneself as an individual. In essence, the logic remains the same as in the past; a veteran in his 30s said: '[You're] a warrior when you come back… You're a man.'

Respect in clan relations

> If you want to say thanks, or there's something ahead of you that's kinda leary, you go to your clan uncle, they pray for you. (A veteran in his late 50s)

An important side of Native American individualism is the existence of social bonds that serve to constrain excessive expression of individuality. The multiple meaningful social relationships, such as those defined by kinship, clan, residence, friendship or religious-ceremonial activities, are accompanied by a complex set of responsibilities, values and norms that are deeply embedded in the personality of the tribal members, and hence in their individuality, giving meaning to and/or motivating personal choices (Straus 1977: 333–334). This means that the Native American often 'lives within himself, but not for himself' (Steiner 1968: 140).

The most important institution which defines relationships and identity within the Crow tribe is the matrilineal clan system: it builds the foundation for social control, respect and honor, to the extent that it is even called 'a way of life' (Real Bird 1997). The Crow call the clans *ashammalíaxxiia*, meaning 'as driftwood lodges'. This can be interpreted as a metaphoric expression of the interdependency, reciprocity and unity between the members of the same clan (Frey 1989: 3–4). In the past they 'camped together, hunted together, fought together, and celebrated together' (Real Bird 1997), and still today, identity is frequently directly related to clan affiliation. Cooperation between members of the same clan continues, and they often support each other financially, emotionally and socially. As a result, clan defines not only what an individual is, but also what he can become in the future (Bauerle 2004: 5; Frey 1989: 43–44; Grim 2000: 59; Old Horn and McCleary 1995: 67).

Another significant affiliation in Crow society is the father's clan. Especially important are the 'clan fathers' and 'clan mothers' (*áassahke),* who are ego's father's brothers and sisters. Correspondingly, Ego is identified as their 'clan child' (*baakáate)* (Frey 1989: 45). The relationship between *áassahke* and *baakáate* is based on reciprocity and respect, and has a great influence on the prospects of success and welfare of a clan child. If an individual has done well for example in military service, or wishes to do so in the future, his family and close clan members will hold a 'giveaway', in which the past or future blessings given by the *áassahke* to their clan child are compensated by offering them gifts (such as blankets and tobacco).[5] Even without a special need, the clan child may organize a meal called a 'clan feed' for his clan parents, invite them to a 'sweat',[6] and show them respect in many ways. In exchange for this the *áassahke* either praises the clan child's achievements in public,[7] or prays and offers him ways of protection—normally in situations when he or she needs special luck, healing or blessing. In a way, then, *áassahke* are mediators, both spiritual (clan child/Creator) and social (clan child/tribe) (see Frey 1989: 46–49, 52–53; Grim 2000: 59; Lowie 1980: 20–21; Old Horn and McCleary 1995: 68; Real Bird 1997;

Voget 1995: 22).[8] Very illustrative of the meaning of *áassahke* is a story of how Crows came to honor them:

> Four brothers decide to worship in four different ways to see who will be the most successful and live the longest. One brother prays to the Sun. (…) The second man goes out to fast and thirst. (…) The third brother builds sweat lodges and calls men of importance to come in and sweat with him. The fourth man feasts and gives gifts to his clan uncles and aunts (…). The faster becomes a prominent man, but is soon killed. The Sun worshipper becomes famous as well, but like his fasting brother, is killed. The sweat lodge owner lives to a good age, becomes a chief, and then dies. But the fourth brother, the one who feasts and gives gifts to his clan uncles and aunts, becomes a *great* chief and lives to such age that "when he moves his skin tears." His deeds are the greatest. Since then, this practice of honoring our clan uncles and aunts has continued. (Frey 1989: 41.)[9]

As can be seen, respect and social bonds are strongly related to Crow individualism, individual identity and choices. After all, values do not necessarily form a consistent whole, but may appear in paradoxes (Nuckolls 1998), and the Crow individualism is a fine example of this, for it paradoxically yet fluently combines the respect for individual expression with social responsibility.

'The Crow do respect their veterans'

> The white people didn't like us [veterans]. They thought we were baby-killers, and all that. The Crows welcomed us back. The Crows [said]: 'Hey, you did something. You did all these things'. (A veteran in his 60s)

Among the Crow as among the United States population in general, different wars are popular and unpopular. However, while often discrediting the political agenda and the politicians, the value of individual warriors is hardly ever questioned. According to Holm (1996: 23), the Native American veterans are respected regardless of political considerations because they are seen as fighting for their (tribal) country and family, and because by doing this they reproduce the tribal self-image. This is analogous with my own observations of the Crow veterans, who are appraised based on their individual performance and the values they have demonstrated they possess.

During my study of Crow military service, the interviewees regularly put emphasis on the elements of respect and individualism. Many, for example, saw their respect for veterans as contrary to the practice of Anglo-Americans, whose support for the troops has often been conditional and dependant on issues such as the popularity of the war in question. The tribal reverence for veterans, on the contrary, was rarely based on their dedication to an abstract end (such as fighting for the peace or well-being of other, unrelated people), but on individual development, unselfish deeds and a sense of responsibility for the family. Among the Crow, the appraisal of veterans was not a political, but a visceral act, emphasizing their meaning as embodiments of tribal values, and their right to fulfillment of their individuality. A phrase commonly heard on the reservation was: 'the Crows *do* respect their veterans'; this was presented as opposed to practice in the mainstream society where attitudes were seen as essentially incoherent and disrespectful, and therefore highly immoral.

Hence, the multifaceted concepts of respect and individualism characterize much of the social relationships of the Crow, and provide an important basis for giving meaning to life experiences such as military service. Finally, the Crow habitually employ the concepts in their arguments to construct their identity as tribal members, and to define and differentiate themselves from the Anglo-American population.

Tradition and the conditions of continuity

> Ever since I was young, it was a part of me that I knew I was gonna be in the military, but I just didn't know when. Because of being who I am, a Crow Indian. (A veteran in his early 40s)

Respect and tradition go together in Crow society: to respect is regarded as traditional, and being traditional is a way of earning the respect of others. Throughout their history, many Native American tribes have relied on tribal custom as the only rightful authority in the organization of their society. Often traditional knowledge is explained to be of divine origin, which makes custom—and the social organization defined by it—sacred and indisputable and its observation (at least ideally) indispensable (Basso 1996; Boldt and Long 1984: 543).

The maintenance of tradition is a constant theme for the Crow tribe. The way of life of pre-reservation times came to an end as the traditional hunting, warfare and living patterns withered away in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Related to this, Lear (2006: 97–98) has presented two ideas of Crow cultural survival. According to the first, there was no way to retain tradition, because the traditional way of life by definition could only have been defended in traditional ways, and the use of any other means (such as resorting to the Anglo-American political system) would in itself have resulted in a break with tradition. The second assertion presented by Lear is that in order for the Crow to survive and continue being Crow at least in some form, they had to acknowledge their loss of the traditional way of life, and accept the possibility of *new ways* to be Crow. According to a Crow friend of mine, Lear's premises were flawed from the beginning, because the traditional ways never truly ended. Certainly, in some fields (such as living patterns, legal system and professional occupations) the only option had been to adapt to the new circumstances, but still, something essential was retained. In the words of my friend: 'I think it's just that the old system is still around, you know.' Unlike Lear, he understood tradition was more than a rigid set of customs and institutions; it was a way to give them meaning and structure reality.

Consequently, it is easy to encounter institutions, such as military service, which the Crow regard as 'traditional', even though the claim would seem rather dubious from the purely historical perspective. However, the authenticity of customs lies not in their antiquity or proved historical continuity, but in the way they are perceived by the people and modified to fit the existing cultural patterns (Sahlins 1999: xi). Participation in the military, for example, does not correspond with the old warrior tradition, but it has nevertheless occupied the same 'niche', reflecting many of its old meanings and values, such as the idea of self-development and individual performance. Therefore, it is often understood as essentially the same.

Conclusions

The Crow commonly identify respect as the most important feature defining their social relations, and a significant part of their way of life. It is manifested in numerous ways, but one of its key aspects is the great respect for individuality. The Crow idea of individualism, however, is always interrelated with the idea of social responsibility. In other words, people are allowed to pursue their own goals freely, but even when fulfilling their individuality their choices are expected to reflect cultural norms and a deep sense of social relatedness. Paradoxically, the individual and social interests are thus forced to coalesce.

Respect and individualism are deeply interrelated with the tradition of Crow military service. These values help the Crow to comprehend and conceptualize their time in the military and transform it into a culturally meaningful experience, and they are an important basis for the appraisal of tribal veterans. This means that the military is often interpreted by the Crow as an opportunity to prove one's worth and a means for personal growth, and tribal veterans are not evaluated for the political implications of their service, but for their personal achievements and demonstrated individual development. These individualistic merits are greatly valued because they are seen to reflect traditional virtues, and to denote the individual's transition to adulthood.

Respect and individualism become explicit in the rituals aimed at honoring tribal veterans, such as homecoming ceremonies, traditional dances and flag processions. By representing values publicly in a customary way, and replicating the admiration of tribal veterans who embody these values, the ceremonies function as a center for their reproduction; in this manner, applying the ideas of Emile Durkheim (1971 [1915]: 427) ceremonies reinforce the continuity of tribal culture, and reaffirm the tribe's unity as a group with shared values.

In discussions about military service, many Crows consciously construct the idea of themselves as having a culture based on respect and individualistic ideals as a means to separate themselves from the Anglo-American population. On another level, they often equate white society with negative values, qualities, attitudes and forms of behavior from which they dissociate themselves. Basso (1979: 64) has observed that mainstream Americans, the 'Whitemen', symbolized for the Western Apache an alien form of logic, manners and ethics; in other words they were a symbol of what the Apache were not. In a similar manner, when members of the Crow tribe define the whites as disrespectful towards their mothers-in-law or with veterans, they are actually defining their own people, using values that interrelate with and construct their understandings of themselves.

In the face of the perceived threat of global or national homogeneity, different indigenous groups have expressed an increased self-consciousness of the worth of their culture and values. This does not imply, as stated by Marshall Sahlins (1999: x), nostalgia for some imaginary pristine state of being, but a desire to construct their lives on their own terms, as distinct communities. The Crow today do this by employing the values of respect and individualism to distinguish themselves from Anglo-Americans, but also to give meaning to new cultural ingredients, turning these elements into an authentic part of their tradition, and thus reproducing their distinctive way of life. The participation of the Crow in the military is a fine example of this, and rather than being a sign of their becoming more 'American', it is actually an indication of them continuing to be distinctively 'Crow'.

NOTES

[1] When communicating in their own language, the Crow people call themselves by their indigenous name 'Apsáalooke' (Children of a large beaked bird). However, I refer to them as Crows, as they refer to themselves with this name when talking in English.
[2] This is an evaluation given by an elderly tribal member that I have not been able to confirm elsewhere.
[3] A survey conducted in grade schools in 1989 indicated that roughly 33 per cent of Crow children under the age of ten spoke the native language (Old Horn and McCleary 1995: 93).
[4] Some modern Native American veterans have also understood war as 'a ritual of survival' or 'a rite of passage' that transformed them from boys to men (Holm 1996: 168; Silver 1994: 8).
[5] The gifts of the clan child are not seen as a 'payment', but as a way of respecting the ancient spiritual practices; if the clan child should fail to give gifts or show respect, the prayers made by the clan parents would be of no effect (Real Bird 1997).
[6] This refers to the sweat lodge (*awushua*), which is a very old Crow ritual. As early as pre-reservation times, Crow warriors often fed and invited their clan fathers or the other elderly men to sweats, and in return they offered the warriors prayers for good luck (Voget 1995: 22; see also Nabokov 1982 [1967]: 131–132, 145–146).
[7] It is not considered appropriate to speak about one's own achievements in public.
[8] The relationship with the clan parents is not dependant on religious affiliation, and even the most committed Christians act as *áassahke* and bless their clan children in ways coherent with their own Christian faith (see also Voget 1995).
[9] Nowadays Crows speaking in English often use the words 'clan uncle' and 'clan aunt' instead of 'clan father' and 'clan mother', which would better correspond to the original Crow kinship terminology.

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