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A Woman's Role in Dakota Society

Throughout *Waterlily* Ella Deloria demonstrates what it means to be a Sioux woman. Essentially what life was like and expected of a Dakota woman before the time of contact with settlers. Toward the end of *Waterlily* we start to see the effects of how life changed for Sioux people. The settlers introduced many new unknown materials like clothing, knives, axes, utensils of metal, guns, etc. However, to be a true Dakota woman the most important aspect was kinship, and can be seen from the point of view of a woman on the Plains. Kinship alone was highly important to the Dakota. It structured daily life (gender roles), attitude, relationship with marriage, and relationships with other tribes were among those of high importance. These were all structured from kinship.

From the beginning in Chapter One, we can see just how important following kinship rules are to the Dakota people. In the beginning Blue Bird is pregnant with Waterlily and she is being led from the horse she is riding by her father-in-law because their camp circle was on the move again. Yet, she refuses to ask him to let her down because of the kinship rule of avoidance to her father-in-law even though she knows it is time to have her baby. She waits until her mother-in-law starts leading her, but only says something to her after she couldn't bear the pain anymore.

To demonstrate how important kinship was, "the first thing to learn was how to treat other people and how to address them. You must not call your relatives and friends by name, for that was rude. Use kinship terms instead. And especially, brothers and sisters, and boy cousins and girl cousins must be very kind to each other. That was the

core of all kinship training” (Deloria, 34). Another great example of sibling behavior was when Waterlily was younger. She threw dirt in Little Chief’s face to be funny, and he started crying. Gloku told Waterlily that one must not hurt a brother. However, Gloku told Little Chief that he should restrain himself at all costs for a sister’s sake, and a girl cousin’s, too because his crying caused Waterlily to be unhappy. Since a brother does not embarrass his girl relatives but strives only to spare them and make them happy. Even when Blue Bird was a little girl she called her brother silly, and her mother told her that was no way for a girl to speak to a brother. One important part in the kinship relationship between brother and sister is that the brother held a protective position about his sister, and was to look after her. This alone was highly guarded, even at an early age. It was a sister’s role to honor her brother. Yet another way to honor a brother was by being good to his children. An example of this is when Lowanla’s two Aunts come to his rescue at the Sun Dance after the pledge he made to save his father was too much for him alone. That day people seen the loftiest expression of kinship affection.

There was also division by gender in the tipi, the men sat, ate, and slept on the left side, while the women of the family belonged on the right side. The parents and grandparents were the ones responsible for really teaching the children the kinship rules. They were held accountable in teaching and enforcing those rules for they were the basis for society. When younger kids were too young to understand kinship rules the parents or grandparents usually corrected the older children instead, teaching the younger one’s by indirection.

Going along with the kinship roles of others, Rainbow’s mother, Gloku had a kinship duty to devote herself to a son’s wife. The kinship duty of siblings of the

opposite gender was what I thought as a special bond, and one of loyalty. Sisters would shift their loyalty from their sister-in-law straight to their brother if she were to overstep her bounds by making absurd demands on their brother. Sisters stand by their brother no matter what. Yet “these intense loyalties between collaterals of opposite sexes were deep-seated, the result of lifelong training. They had been going on long before her (Blue Bird) and would continue long after she was gone--as long as Dakotas remained Dakotas and their kinship sanctions endured. Everyone knew and accepted them and aimed to play his or her part within their framework, and then relationships remained smooth” (Deloria, 60).

Adding to the kinship relationship between brother and sister is that a brother needs to be brave, strong, and fearless. He needs to be ready to do great things. It is a sister’s job to praise her brother after a victory, and not to cry. Along with many other tasks for a sister, one very honorable was to carry the scalp in a victory procession, and was always the prerogative of a hero’s sister. It can be said that Waterlily and Little Chief had a deep loyalty for one another as brother and sister.

I felt that the only time Waterlily ever really challenged the kinship rules and just the rules in general of Dakota life was when she was at the Sun Dance and she took Lowanla some water. Since “when the dancers came to their sagebrush couches to rest, the women quickly passed them small bowls of water to their sweethearts, who as quickly received them, half knowing they would be offered” (Deloria, 131). So she felt ashamed and naïve, knowing that she had no right to be there, since no one was expecting her. Before this event, she had never really challenged the kinship roles of women, but rather embraced them.

Blue Bird explained to Waterlily about courtship and the basic rules like going off with a boy because her reputation would suffer, and that you need to be careful with one self. Since a man does not want a woman too easy at courtship because he cannot trust her since she is too easy. A man must see a woman and decide he is interested. She can't force his attention, as it is not lasting. These are all important factors when talking about marriage, and the rules. It was a high compliment to be bought like Waterlily was by Sacred Horse. However, one can make the argument that a huge factor in her acceptance was for her brother Little Chief, who would receive the horses Sacred Horse presented for Waterlily. Again, this is showing the deep bond between brother and sister. It was up to the women folk of his to uphold his honor and to defend him in all phases of his life, so again kinship wielded a controlling force.

When she went into Sacred Horse's tiyospaye, her kinship training would be in question. She learned by subtle observation who was what to her, and then she must proceed to conduct herself properly in each case, as prescribed by kinship law. This was no problem because it was ordinary intelligence as long as they were brought up within the framework. Brothers or cousins of her husband put her in a joking relationship with them, as she was soon to find out when they were joking around with her. One knew that it was customary for men and women to keep with their own kind in public. The married did not demand one another's exclusive attention, and Waterlily sure didn't demand that of Sacred Horse. She was always quiet unless he spoke to her. It was her duty to honor and respect her husband and to keep her life with him a secret always, it was her responsibility to accept her new life, and not act childish.

It was her duty to watch her kinship manners since she was in her husband's

tiyospaye, and to be respectful and honor by making correct kinship terms to his family. If you made crude mistakes they would think you were ignorant.

Even after her husband died, his family still kept their kinship obligations and told her that “you are ours, wherever you go (a delicate reference to the child she carried, who would be son or daughter to its father’s brothers and male cousins)” (Deloria, 211). Since whenever possible, a child should have for a father one who is father to him already, and not a total, unrelated stranger. Kinship law didn’t demand that a widow marry a brother or cousin of her husband; however Waterlily mutually agreed to marry Lowanla, who would be father to her child. She agreed even though she had all her family to help and protect her and her son Mitawa. Yet people praised him for his fine kinship sense toward his dead cousin’s son.

Just to show how important kinship training was in Dakota life, we can see how the children acted when Waterlily was on her way home to her family and they came upon a family who lived out alone in the wilderness. Nobody shamed these girls of this man and woman into good behavior; they were growing up without civility. Since Camp Circle people were civilized; they knew how to treat each other, they had rules to follow. These children were wild because they lacked any standards of social behavior. They were unkempt and very hostile, they looked the warriors in the eyes which was very disrespectful, and sat cross-legged like men. You can just see what a disaster life would be without the kinship rules for the people.

Overall throughout the book, Waterlily ultimately kept hold of her kinship training, and there is really only one incident where she abandons it which is when she snuck Lowanla some water at the Sun Dance. That was the only time that stuck out to me

of her really ignoring her kinship training because she lead a good Dakota life. She was well trained in the kinship fashion. She accepted her obligations from the beginning once she started to learn. She accepted her role toward her brother, and even when she was bought by Sacred Horse she accepted her duty and lived accordingly. When Waterlily was a baby and dying, Blue Bird took to the forest and began to pray and offer her father's otter skin charm as a sacrifice for her daughter, was the only other time that really caught my attention of a woman not following gender rules or kinship rules because it was not a woman's job to pray in that manner. In conclusion, you can see how important kinship rules were to Dakota people, and should still be followed somewhat in that fashion today because I think it has fallen away from our people.