

**Commentary on  
"Lakota Beaded Costumes of the  
Early Reservation Era"  
by Marsha Clift Bol**

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Marsha Clift Bol, in her article "Lakota Beaded Costumes of the Early Reservation Era," asks why this art form thrived among the Lakota Sioux in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries despite the overwhelming disruption and stress on the Lakota Sioux culture. The answer is easily understood when the nature of that disruption is considered.

During the late 1800s, the Lakota Sioux lifestyle forcibly changed from a nomadic, warfare-based culture to a confined, sedentary existence on governmental reservations. This primarily impacted the men of the tribe, as their primary way of life disappeared in the face of the drastic economic and social changes. The woman's role as family caretaker, however, remained largely intact, and thus the disruption on the ordinary lives of women was much lessened.

Still, the disruption existed. The growing emphasis on creation of artifacts such as the Lakota beaded costumes served as one means to combat this disruption by providing an outlet for maintaining and emphasizing the cultural and emotional significance of the Lakota way of life. The beadwork was a specifically Native means of expression rather than a white man's form, and thus lent itself to becoming a vehicle for preserving Native American traditional form and design.

Simply maintaining the original form of the artifacts was not sufficient. Lakota beadwork became more and more complex and elaborate as it developed during this era, no doubt to heighten the difference in cultural identity between the two traditions and to fight against the ever-present threat of assimilation of the Lakota into the prevailing white culture. With the disappearance of the nomadic way of life, practicality could give way to pure aesthetics. This impetus produced the fully beaded Lakota dresses, especially for children, which would be difficult at best to wear under any circumstances (ceremonial or otherwise), as well as the fully beaded (soles and all) moccasins -- which could surely not be worn for everyday use in a nomadic lifestyle. Substitutions of materials from white culture for those materials no longer available to the Lakota (such as buckskin) also transformed Lakota artifacts while still preserving their essence.

Also, with the disappearance of the men's way of life, and thus the men's art forms, the Lakota women incorporated the forms and pictorial imagery of the traditionally masculine realm into their own work, thereby ensuring preservation of the symbolism and imagery in some form, albeit quite transformed.

Once again, with the Lakota beaded costumes of the early reservation era, we see tradition mutating in response to external pressure, yet retaining the essence of the original culture.