

Walter L. Williams, Review of Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1987), pp. 126-130.

**The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions. By Paula Gunn Allen. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986. xi & 311 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 Cloth.**

Paula Gunn Allen is already well known as a Native American poet, but in this important and pathbreaking collection of her essays she also makes significant contributions to the study of contemporary American Indians, literary criticism, and Women's Studies. Her desire is to make spirituality a central theme of American Indian Studies, and through that theme to illustrate how modern Indian people should not be perceived primarily as doomed victims but as amazingly persistent carriers of a dream. She calls on scholars to reject the patriarchal distortions of previous writings on Indians, and to recognize the gynocentric nature of many native cultures.

In the first section of her book, Allen defines a gynocracy as a woman-centered society in which women "occupy prominent positions and decision-making capacity at every level of society" (page 3). This does not mean that such societies oppressed men, but that they valued the complementary roles which diverse individuals can contribute to the community. Her emphasis is in accord with this reviewer's thesis in *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (1986), that a society which highly values women's roles also respects the unique contributions of androgynous males. If the feminine is not seen as secondary to the masculine, there is an appreciation for diversity.

The world-views of such societies are distinct from those of Europeans in their emphasis on three concepts: the social responsibility of each person to the group, a lack of punitiveness as a means of control, and a strong commitment to the welfare of the young and the aged. These values, she argues, follow from the centrality of women. In traditional cultures motherhood had a much higher status than in Western culture, with a focus not just on the power to give birth, but on the power to create and to transform something from one state to another.

With this background, contemporary Indian feminists do not see their role as revolutionaries, but as cultural conservators who are striving to restore women's ancient ritual power. Deprived of their voice in U.S.-modeled tribal governments, twentieth century Indian women emerged as leaders in urban

Indian communities and then later began taking more activist roles in self-determination efforts on reservations. By 1981 sixty-seven tribes had women heads of government, a higher proportion by far than among white governments.

Allen writes a strong critique of the notion of universal male dominance, seeing it as a product of social stratification and colonization. She criticizes historians who write from an assumption of male dominance, and who assume that all chiefs named in documents are male, unless they are specifically identified as female. By taking a female-centered approach to history, she points out that a major impact of Christian missionaries was their attack on the "power of the matrons" and their encouraging converts to abandon the matrilineal extended family in favor of the patriarchal nuclear family.

The crucial elements in the decline of gynocracy under colonization included the displacement of female spirits with a male God, the destruction of traditional governing systems in which women had great influence, the replacement of aboriginal economies in which women had important roles as farmers and food gatherers, the decline of extended kinship clans, and the propagandizing of Western values (especially the notion of obedience to superiors) in schools and churches.

The second section of the book is an analysis of American Indian literature. Because many historical/anthropological writings on Indians are distorted by a patriarchal perspective, Allen suggests that oral traditions and literary forms may more accurately reflect Indian values. With the lack of native control of trends in scholarship, she sees Indian fiction writers as more important in the "resistance to cultural and spiritual genocide" (page 42). Indian literature reflects values of dualism rather than hierarchy, and the complementarity of all things into a unitary wholeness. Native approaches assume that everything is alive, with a mystical fluidity and creative flux, that the earth itself is a living organism. Literature is thus central in Indian cultures, by explaining the world in philosophical rather than scientific terms.

Women have a particularly influential voice in Indian literature, and Allen focuses on writers like Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, Wendy Rose and others. Nevertheless, she does not limit herself only to female writers, but provides valuable analysis on the thoughts of Black Elk and on recent writers like N. Scott Momaday and James Welch. The themes that she sees emerging in such literature include an emphasis on the impact of genocide on modern Indian personalities, but fortified with an undying hope of transformation and cultural survival. Allen concludes that Indians will survive,

because of their close bond to the land and to the spirit world, because their message is now being recognized by the post-Christian post-industrial world. She shares with other writers the conclusion that the Indian "has faced ultimate disaster time and time again over the ages and has emerged stronger and more certain of the endurance of the people, the spirits, and the land" (page 160).

Though the last section of the book is written from the perspective of Allen's lesbian-feminist philosophy, she is critical of white lesbian writers who have taken a puritanical approach to sex. Allen describes how the colonial system suppressed a free and open sexuality that was common in many tribes, and replaced it with a European sexual double standard that attempted to deny the sexual expressiveness of women, effeminate males, and children. She shows how Indian societies did not define people into two opposite groups of "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals," but that there was a much more fluid approach to sexuality. Within the context of considerable separation between the sexes, people often had their closest emotional bonds with a person of the same sex, even while they might be married to the other sex. After Allen's work, scholars will not be able to continue ignoring the important sexual aspects of American Indian Studies and of Indian-white relations.

Just as Indian values of individual freedom, of confederation forms of government, and of an acceptance of diversity had an immense impact on the eighteenth century Enlightenment, so Allen calls for a renewed recognition that native values have much to offer modern society today. She envisions a world where women and gay people would not be oppressed and derided, where the elderly and the youth would be respected and honored, where the distribution of goods and power would be egalitarian, where the destruction of the earth's resources would be curtailed, and where the spiritual nature of all life would be primary.

Such idealism leaves itself open to challenge. Certainly Allen makes many generalizations about a wide diversity of Native American cultures, and specific points may not apply to particular tribes. Much of what she says does not apply to class-stratified cultures in the Northwest and in MesoAmerica. Specialists might pick at her argument, and despite the mass of footnotes there are many statements which do not have standard documentation. But if critics engage in this behavior, they will miss the major points of the book. The value of Allen's work lies in its setting of a new paradigm, a new perspective from which future writers can approach Native American Studies.

She wants to shift from a male-centered to a female-centered axis. When this is done, the image of the Indian as a (male individualized) noble brave or

bloodthirsty savage is replaced by the image of an earth-centered society. The continuity of feminine spirituality and kinship is emphasized, rather than the changing scene of masculine politics and military action. Allen wants to shock us out of our complacency based on our uncritical acceptance of patriarchal sources, to get us to dig more deeply into other sources on Indian women. Her message is one that must be pursued by historians, social scientists, and literary critics. For alerting us to the importance of the feminine in an Indian world-view, we owe her a great debt.

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