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The Life of Indian Women in the Paiute Tribe: Based on Sarah Winnemucca's Autobiography

In Europe, the most popular picture of Native Americans is formed by youth literature—e.g. *The Leatherstocking Tales* by J. F. Cooper or the *Winnetou* series written by Karl May. Children often ‘play Indians’ or dream about great adventures in the Wild West; the role of a great native warrior, hunter, or a tribal leader is attractive to them. These are all male roles and stereotypes—but what picture do we have of Native American women? One legendary character, Pocahontas comes to mind: a beautiful, brave ‘princess’ who falls in love with a white man, John Smith. In fact, her story is nothing else but a love story which perfectly fits in with European cultural standards.¹ I think these stereotypes indicate that the perspective of Native American women is worth further investigation.

What interested me most was the everyday life of Native American women. My research questions were (1) what roles did native women play in their society, and (2) in what manner were they raised? To get a deeper insight into the lives of Native American women I decided to analyze the first autobiography written by an American Indian woman, *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*.² The writer, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, was a military interpreter and an activist who spoke out for the rights of her people. I have chosen this particular work for three reasons. Firstly, the writer was born early enough to experience Indian life in its original form, before contact with the Western world affected and altered it significantly. Yet, she also experienced American culture through the goals she was pursuing. Secondly, this book is an authentic autobiography—which means, that Winnemucca's words were written by herself, not dictated to and written down by a white person. Thirdly, her life and character are extraordinary: she could stand up for herself in a world which neglected both women and Native Americans.

Sarah Winnemucca was born around 1844, on the territory of today's Nevada, as granddaughter of the Paiute tribe's chieftain.³ The Paiutes lived in the Great Basin, in a harsh, bleak environment. They led a nomadic lifestyle and earned their living by means of hunting mainly small game and gathering seeds and pine-nuts.⁴

¹ Rayna GREEN, ‘The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture’, *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Autumn, 1975), 698–714, 699.

² Sarah Winnemucca HOPKINS, *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, Boston: Cupples, Upham & Co., 1883.

³ HOPKINS, 5.

⁴ George F. BRIMLOW, ‘The Life of Sarah Winnemucca: The Formative Years’, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Jun., 1952), 103–134, 103.

The name Paiute is not an Indian word; Winnemucca suspects that it resulted from a misinterpretation. ‘Sometimes we are called Pine-nut eaters, for we are the only tribe that lives in the country where Pine-nuts grow.’⁵

Anglo-Americans appeared in this part of America in the 1840’s—when Winnemucca was very little. Her grandfather, the chieftain was happy to see his long looked for ‘white brothers’, as he called them. According to a Paiute creation-tale, the white siblings left the reddish-skinned siblings and moved onto the other side of the world.⁶ Captain Truckee, Winnemucca’s grandfather welcomed white men and built a friendly relationship with them. He fought in the Mexican War on the side of the Americans, and he wanted his whole family to maintain this relationship.⁷ Nevertheless, in her childhood, Sarah was scared to death by these ‘owl-like creatures, who had hair on their faces and pale blue eyes’.⁸ Later, at the age of fourteen, when she came to live with the family of a white settler—she became familiar with the white customs and the English and Spanish languages.⁹ In the aftermath of the Paiute War in 1860, fought between Indians and white settlers, the Paiutes were sent to the Pyramid Lake Reservation.¹⁰ As there were constant problems with the supplies and various animosities between settlers and Native Americans, Sarah began her career as an interpreter between the two sides.¹¹ She became an advocate for the rights of Native Americans, traveling across the United States to give lectures to Americans about her people and their living conditions.¹²

Life among the Piutes is the collected and edited version of Winnemucca’s lectures she has given. It was published in 1883, and the only editing Mary Peabody Mann did was to correct the punctuation and some orthographical mistakes in the manuscript. As the subtitle of the book shows, Winnemucca’s aim was to describe the Paiutes’ *wrongs and claims*—in other words, to justify her nation and draw Americans’ attention to their situation. She uses a rather emotional language in her writing—especially when describing sad memories of her childhood. For example: ‘Oh my! oh my! That made me worse than ever. I cried, so that one could have heard my poor heart beat. Oh, how I wished I was back with my father again! All the children were not afraid of the white people—only me.’¹³ With her choice of language, the writer earns the reader’s sympathy—it is easy to identify oneself with the storyteller and feel sorry for her and the situation of her tribe.

⁵ HOPKINS, 75.

⁶ HOPKINS, 5–6.

⁷ HOPKINS, 9–10.

⁸ HOPKINS, 25.

⁹ HOPKINS, 58.

¹⁰ HOPKINS, 73.

¹¹ Andrew S. McCCLURE, ‘Sarah Winnemucca: [Post]Indian Princess and Voice of the Paiutes’, *MELUS*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Religion, Myth and Ritual (Summer, 1999), 29–51, 30.

¹² McCCLURE, 43.

¹³ HOPKINS, 28.

Time after time, she even addresses the audience: ‘Dear reader, I must tell a little more about my poor people, and what we suffer at the hands of our white brothers. Since the war of 1860 there have been one hundred and three (103) of my people murdered, and our reservations taken from us; and yet we, who are called blood-seeking savages, are keeping our promises to the government. Oh, my dear good Christian people, how long are you going to stand by and see us suffer at your hands?’¹⁴ As this quotation also demonstrates, her autobiography can be seen as a political work, which aims to inform her white audience about the injustices of the reservation system.¹⁵

Some critics claim that Winnemucca was confused about her identity, that she had a double consciousness; her legacy is also seen as controversial. Although she had been fighting for her nation, she was accused of being too sympathetic towards Anglo-American culture, and leaving her roots behind as she worked for the US government and supported the assimilation of Native Americans.¹⁶ She had a rational mind; she followed her grandfather’s path: she also recognized that assimilation was the only way in order for her people to survive. Indeed, she accommodated to American customs, got Christianized and was married to a white man for several years;¹⁷ but if we read her autobiography, the love she had for her family and her native culture is easy to see. She was conscious of her roots and thought of herself as a Paiute of full value. Moreover, she refers to the Paiute customs and worldview with the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’, which makes her identity clear. Yet, as she was exposed to Christianity very early, her worldview differed in certain aspects from that of the people in her tribe. Also, her job demanded a deep understanding of both sides; therefore, she believed the peaceful coexistence of the two cultures was possible.

She writes relatively little about tribal life: only one chapter of *Life among the Piutes* is dedicated to this topic. However, this chapter is elaborate enough to get a picture of the main events in a woman’s life. Family was above everything for the Paiutes. Three generations were living in one lodge, but other relatives were just as important as the nuclear family: ‘Our tenth cousin is as near to us as our first cousin; and we don’t marry into our relations.’¹⁸ Girls were not allowed to meet any boys that were outside the family, and were therefore potential wooers. The only meeting opportunity for the youth was at festivals—the best example of this is the Festival of the Flowers, which took place in the Spring, when all the flowers bloom, and its main attraction was the flower-dance. It was actually a celebration of the

¹⁴ HOPKINS, 89.

¹⁵ McCLURE, 39.

¹⁶ Noreen Groover LAPE, ‘I Would Rather Be with My People, but Not to Live with Them as They Live: Cultural Liminality and Double Consciousness in Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins’s *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*’, *American Indian Quarterly*. Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer, 1998), 259–279.

¹⁷ BRIMLOW, 128.

¹⁸ HOPKINS, 45.

girls, as most of them were named after flowers; for example, Sarah Winnemucca's original name was Thocmetony, which means 'shellflower'. The highlight of the ceremony was when the girls decorated their clothes with flowers and then danced around in a circle, singing a song. Their sweethearts danced beside them and joined them in singing.¹⁹

However, girls were not allowed to marry until they reached womanhood. 'That period is recognized as a very sacred thing, and is the subject of a festival, and has peculiar customs,'²⁰ describes Winnemucca. The young woman had to move away to live in a tepee separately for 25 days. During this time she fasted, excluding all meat from her diet. She also did some 'strengthening rituals'. For example, she piled up 3 stacks of wood every day. Two of her older friends accompanied and helped her. At the end of the 25 days, the young woman gave all her clothing to her attendants, as a reward for their care. This ritual made it clear for everyone that there is another young woman ready for marriage in the tribe. This was a sign for tribesmen who wished to marry this young woman to start courting. 'But the courting is very different from the courting of the white people. He never speaks to her, or visits the family, but endeavors to attract her attention by showing his horsemanship, etc. As he knows that she sleeps next to her grandmother in the lodge, he enters in full dress after the family has retired for the night, and seats himself at her feet.'²¹ The young woman and her suitor never talked to each other, but if the girl did not like him, she could send him away by getting out of her bed and laying down next to her mother. Women were never forced by their family to marry a man against their will. It was their own decision to make.

There was a special bond between grandmothers and granddaughters, especially when it came to growing up. The grandmother was the one who informed the young woman about women's things, they slept next to each other and she was a kind of confidante for the granddaughter. She was also the one to inform the father of the young woman's decision to get married to her suitor: 'The young man is summoned by the father of the girl, who asks him in her presence if he really loves his daughter, and reminds him, if he says he does, of all the duties of a husband. He then asks his daughter the same question and sets before her minutely all her duties. And these duties are not slight. She is to dress the game, prepare the food, clean the buckskins, make his moccasins, dress his hair, bring all the wood—in short, do all the household work.'²²

The wedding ceremony also had its own customs. Food was prepared in baskets for the big feast, where the bride and the groom sat next to each other. The highlight of the ceremony was when the girl handed her husband a basket of food:

¹⁹ HOPKINS, 47.

²⁰ HOPKINS, 48.

²¹ HOPKINS, 48–49.

²² HOPKINS, 49.

he seized the girl's wrist and took the food with his left hand.²³ After the wedding, the couple gave away all the clothing they had ever worn and dress themselves in completely new clothes—just as the girl had given away all her clothes after the ritual of reaching full womanhood. I believe this custom is a symbol of stepping out from one role and taking up another one. A woman is different from a girl just as a housewife is different from a single woman—therefore, she cannot wear the same clothes as before.

The newly-weds were presented with a wigwam for their own use; they lived there together until their first child was born. After childbirth, it was the husband who went through the same rituals as young women after their first period. He fasted, omitting meat from his diet and piled up stacks of wood for 25 days; in addition, he had to do all the household chores during that time. Winnemucca adds that if men did not take their part in childcare, they were considered outcasts.²⁴ I believe this attitude proves how family-centred traditional Paiute culture was.

Within the tribe, men occupied the leading roles and fundamentally, they were the decision makers; however, the opinion of women also mattered, and to some extent, they were equal to men. The tribe had a male chieftain, who appointed sub-chiefs for special duties. Winnemucca compared the role of the chief to the role of a father – he discusses everything with his people, and the decision is made together. Nevertheless, the chief's word was the decisive one within the tribe; just as that of the father was within the family. The leaders met up in the evenings, they sat in a circle and smoked—because 'men never talk without smoking first.'²⁵ Everyone had the right to speak up; even women and children could join these discussions in the council tent. They sat in an outer circle because there would be too much smoke inside. 'The women know as much as the men do, and their advice is often asked. We have a republic as well as you. The council-tent is our Congress, and anybody can speak who has anything to say, women and all. They are always interested in what their husbands are doing and thinking about.'²⁶

At the marriage ceremony, a woman promised to faithfully stay with her husband in all the dangers they went through, and to do *everything* together, not only raising their children. Women could take part even in wars. Primarily, they were the ones to carry their husbands off the battlefield if he got wounded or killed. But there were some cases with women taking the place of their husbands and fight just as bravely as men do.²⁷

All in all, reading Sarah Winnemucca's autobiography led me to the conclusion that her strong character and outstanding career are not incidental. She was raised in a culture which valued women—the Paiutes knew that it is beneficial for the tribe

²³ HOPKINS, 49–50.

²⁴ HOPKINS, 50.

²⁵ HOPKINS, 53.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

to have not only brave and wise men among themselves, but also strong women. Thocmetony imagined a world where men and women, just as different nations, would live peacefully side-by-side, exercising mutual respect towards each other: 'If women could go into your Congress, I think justice would soon be done to the Indians. I can't tell about all Indians; but I know my own people are kind to everybody that does not do them harm; but they will not be imposed upon, and when people are too bad, they rise up and resist them. This seems to me all right.'²⁸

Abstract

The personal narrative of Native Americans is a neglected part of history, especially the perspective of women. This paper offers an insight into the everyday life of Indian women and their role within their tribe. I will analyse the first autobiography written by a Native American woman, Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims. In her work, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins describes in detail the main events and ceremonies of a woman's life: the ritual of reaching womanhood, finding a partner, the wedding ceremony, marriage and gender roles. Accordingly, my paper is centered around the analysis of the description Winemucca provides of these aspects of a woman's life.

Keywords

Native Americans, women, Paiute, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, autobiography

²⁸ HOPKINS, 53.