

Reflections on the Spirituality of the Kainai Blood Tribe

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ABSTRACT: The spirituality of the Kainai people, members of the Siksikaitsitapi, the Blackfoot Confederacy, can be defined as a way of being, speaking, living, or in our words *Kiipaitapiiwahsinnooni*. The spirituality of the Kainai Nation is embodied within the individual. Spirituality becomes a part of one's being, one's life-world, is intertwined in everything one does, thinks, speaks, helping one to achieve "*matsipaitapiiysini*". *Matsipaitapiiysini* is that state of being of harmony, of spiritual enlightenment, having *kimmapiypitssini*. *Kimmapiypitssini* is a state of being where one has empathy, respect, honours the individual, is compassionate with others –it is the highest level of being one can hope to achieve.

RESUME: On peut définir la spiritualité des Kainai, qui font partie des Siksikaitsitapi (Confédération des Pieds Noirs), comme un état d'être, une façon de parler, de vivre ou, dans nos propres termes, de *Kiipaitapiiwahsinnooni*. La spiritualité des Kainai est incarnée dans l'individu. Elle devient partie intégrante de son être, de son propre monde quotidien. Elle est indissociable de tout ce qu'il fait, de tout ce qu'il pense, de tout ce qu'il dit. C'est le *matsipaitapiiysini*. Le *Matsipaitapiiysini* est un état d'être harmonieux, de révélation spirituelle, de *kimmapiypitssini*. Lorsque l'on ressent de l'empathie, que l'on montre du respect, que l'on vénère l'individu, que l'on est compatissant pour autrui, c'est le niveau de vie le plus élevé que l'on puisse espérer atteindre.

Introduction

The spirituality of the *Kainai* people, members of the *Siksikaitsitapi*—the Blackfoot Confederacy can be defined as a way of being, speaking, living, or in our words, *Kiipaitapiiwahsinnooni*. The spirituality of the *Kainai* nation is embodied within the individual. Spirituality becomes a part of one's being, one's life-world, is intertwined in everything one does, thinks, speaks, helping one to achieve "matsipaitapiisini". Matsipaitapiisini is that state of being, of harmony, of spiritual enlightenment, having "kimmapiyitssini. Kimmapiyitssini is a state of being where one has empathy, respect, honours the individual, is compassionate for others – it is the highest level of being one can hope to achieve.

The physicality of the spirituality is found in the ceremonies from the smudge ceremony, and the sacred ceremonies of the *Motoki*, *Iitskinmai*, and the other societies, to the all night smoke ceremonies, to the opening of the sacred bundles at significant times of the year. My own understanding comes from how sweetgrass is used during prayer, or when making an offering of tobacco while making a special request or visiting a sacred site.

Spiritual Significance of Names

Oki & greetings, I am *Staahtsisttayaaki*, Dr. Genevieve Anne Fox, from the *Kainai* Blood Nation. I was invited to present at the February 1st, 2014 Spirituality Conference at the University of Calgary. This paper that accompanies the presentation I made is written in the ethnographic-narrative style. I begin this article with great humility as I am a spiritual person who has been grounded in the spirituality of the *Kainai*-Blood Nation from my first memory of this life that I have lived as a daughter, grand-daughter, sister, auntie, mother, wife, teacher/educator, grand-mother. The question on the spirituality of the *Kainai* Blood People was difficult to write about as I had to translate all my thoughts from the Blackfoot Language to English. Many Blackfoot words lose the strength of their meaning when they are translated into the English Language. I can only write about what I know and what I have personally experienced in the Spirituality of the *Kainai* Blood Nation, some aspects of the spirituality can only be described in general terms as I do not have the authority to speak about them.

The significance of one's name influences how one sees oneself in the life-world that I live in. I was gifted with the names of my grand-mothers who lived during the pre and post-Treaty 7 eras; when children were being removed from their homes and brought to residential schools where the process to "kill the Indian in the child" (Harper, 2008) was conducted by missionaries. *Staahtsisttayaaki* is my great-great grandmother's name. Her grandfather was *Piinakkooyim* (Chief Seen From Afar) who was signatory to the *Lame Bull* Treaty with the United States in 1855. Genevieve was my paternal grandmother's name she was the only child of Mike Blood and Louise Spotted Eagle. Mike Blood was the son of *Naatoh'kyiaaki* (Sacred Medicine Bear

from the traditional hunting grounds of the Blackfoot Confederacy and they were starving looking for their uncle. My great-grandmother married a cavalry officer from Ireland (Sprigot). Annie was one of the children who did not go to school, she did not speak English only Blackfoot, her mother could not teach her the Gros Ventre language because my grandmother Annie was given away as a child bride to William Wadsworth, the marriage was consummated after she turned sixteen years old. My mother is the youngest (she is the only one left) of the family of 13 and her biological father was Bull Shields whose father was one of the Spanish Conquistadors (name unknown). It is knowing this history, knowing my ancestry, that brought me back to understand who I am, and where my place is in this world. I understand that I have the responsibility to transfer this knowledge to my grandchildren. Knowledge of knowing who one's ancestors were makes one's spirit stronger. The knowledge of knowing what happened to your family, your nation or nations provides one with the strength to strive to make things better not only for oneself but for the rest of the people one is connected with.

Foundations of knowing the language of Niitsipoahsin

The other foundation one needs is to know the language, as the language helps to prepare one for the work with which one is gifted. The children who attended residential schools were placed in "a total institution" as defined by the Law Commission of Canada. "Total institutions seek to control every aspect of life, how those in custody dress, wash, speak, eat, sleep, and so on....[and include] excessive punishments,... banning Indigenous languages and cultures, assigning numbers or Christian names for birth names, cutting sacred braids of hair, group delousing, and chronic failures to protect students from physical and sexual abuse" (p. 10, *Witnessess*). While the children were in these schools the language taught was usually by speakers whose first language was not English. Therefore, the children were not taught the English language to the depth that it is taught today and the schools released the children when they turned sixteen or reached grade 8. The students from these schools were not prepared for life in the mainstream nor were they prepared for life in their home community as they did not have the language skills to communicate with their families or the Elders. I have had conversations with many family members who attended residential school, and the stories they tell are horrifying, and many are examples of how resilient they were to endure this experience. I have a grandson who just turned seven on February 11th; I try to imagine him going to the residential school not being able to see his mother or father for weeks at a time. Would he remember his grandparents after a while? The image is too painful, then I think of all the parents who had to give up their children to these institutions, and then when they returned many were damaged physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. The children of today still carry this intergenerational trauma, it manifests in many ways.

Knowing the Blackfoot Language—or *Niitsipoahsin*—as fluently as I do has given me the privilege to understand the many layers of meaning that each word has. Furthermore, being exposed to the spirituality of the *Kainai* Blood People from an early age has helped me to understand how to live my life. *Kiipaitapiiwahsinooni*—our way of life, our way of being, is strengthened by the spiritual ceremonies one participates in. Some of the understandings I have on *Kainai* Spirituality are not from someone who taught me specifically, I have achieved a greater understanding of our spiritual ways through reflection and meditating. My “grandmothers” (this includes all my aunties and spiritual grandmothers) would always pray in the Blackfoot language whenever we travelled somewhere. As a young child visiting my grandmothers, I would awaken to hear them praying before they started cooking or going about their chores in the early mornings. In all the work that I have been involved in, the Elders have always blessed this work so that we could achieve what we started out to do. I carry those prayers with me where ever I travel.

My grandmother Annie was always with us as a young child, she showed me and my siblings how to live off the land, and she showed us how to respect all that we gathered. She was a member of the Motoki (Buffalo Women’s Society) for many years. I remember when she would make preparations for the *Aakokatsin* she would load up her wagon and hitch up her team of horses then travel the thirty kilometers to our sacred ceremonial grounds on the western slope of the Belly Buttes. She would never run out of food for the duration of the time for the ceremonies. Sometimes these would last as long as three weeks. At the end of the ceremonies we would go to the river bottom and pick the Saskatoon berries and then slowly make our way home to the foothills where her summer cabin was located, or she would come to our home, which was further west along the Belly River. We would all help her pick the berries and dry the berries. My father was a hunter and he would bring home what he had hunted, deer, elk, moose or other. My grandmother showed us how to prepare the meat for drying or smoking. We were never hungry. Throughout all these activities she would be praying, singing or telling us stories. At night in her tent we would all try to sleep with her. It was at these times she would begin telling stories of *Napi*, *Kaatois*, *Pia*, and the stories of the woman who married *lipisowahsi*. She would always end the night with prayer thanking *Ihtsipaitapiyopa* for giving us all that we had.

As I grew older, I never thought about our ways dying. I would attend the *Aakokatsin* every year; it was always there at the same time of the year. I belonged in the circle. Before I had my first child I danced with one of the bundles to pray that he would grow up strong and healthy, and he did. He is now forty-one years old and participates in the *Kanatsomitaa* (Warrior Horse Society). When my friends or family were sick, I would pray for them to get well and make a pledge that I would get my face painted or dance with the bundle that I requested help from. When events in my life were difficult, I always turn to our ways to seek guidance and help; they have never failed me.

The ceremonies of our ways are too complex to describe, knowing that our spiritual ways are strengthening each year as more of the younger people are

participating. This gives me hope that with this strengthening our language, *Niitsipoahsin*, the Blackfoot Language is being revitalized and that it will be spoken again by many of our people. *Niitsipoahsin* is a sacred language; the words come from within our bodies, as we use our whole body to form the words before they are released with our breath, the same breath that came from our ancestors. It is as if they were the ones speaking. The spirituality of the *Kainai* Blood People will always be strong as more of our young people participate in our ceremonies and speak the language, greater understanding of who we are and what the residential schools and colonization tried to take away will continue to be strengthened, revitalized, and regenerated.

Scared Landscapes of Kainai

I am *Staahtsistayaaki*; I am from the sacred landscape embedded within the Traditional Lands of the Siksikaitsitapi, the Blackfoot Confederacy. I am home wherever I am in this territory, as the famous Lakota Warrior Crazy Horse once said, "it is where my ancestors are buried." When I visit my Homeland—the Blood Indian Reserve—I am embraced by *Ninastako* on the west and *Mokowansin* on the east. These two landmarks are significant to me as *Mokowansin* is where our annual sacred ceremonies take place, and *Ninastako* encourages me to continue to strive to make the life-world of the *Niitsitapi* (all my relatives who are Indigenous to Native America) a better place, utilizing the knowledge from the newcomers to enhance *Kiipaitapiiwahsinnon*, our ways of living, our ways of being. As the great Chief Dan George once said, "Like the Thunderbird of old, I shall rise again out the sea, I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success – his education, his skills, and with these new tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society" (Chief Dan George, 1967).

Years ago my people could not leave the reserve without a pass stating where they were going. We were not a conquered people, but the government did not live up to its treaty promises made to my ancestors who understood that no one could own the land, we could only share it. At the time when treaties were being made with the newcomers, my ancestors understood the significance of a treaty as there had been treaties made with some of the traditional enemies of the Blackfoot Confederacy before contact with the newcomers. *Inaistsisin* was invoked with the understanding that when one makes a treaty with another nation we invoke the powers of the Creator, *Ihtsipaitapiyopa*, and that the pipe when it is used in the way it was during the making of a treaty had spiritual significance – it was a sacred covenant. When Treaty 7 was made with the representatives of the Queen of Britain, it had spiritual significance to all the Chiefs of the Blackfoot Confederacy and the other nations who were also included in this treaty. The Chiefs understood Treaty 7 to be a sacred covenant that could not be broken as long as the two parties lived, "as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow...." This is the way of the pipe. Treaty 7 was understood to be a peace treaty where we would share with the newcomers, the traditional territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy from the

North Saskatchewan River, east of the Rocky Mountains to the boundaries of present day Manitoba, south to the United States border, but the traditional Blackfoot Confederacy territory extends to the Wyoming border to where present day Yellowstone Park is located.

According to the collective understanding of the traditional Elders from Treaty 7, as written in their book, *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty 7*, the Queen's representatives were tasked with the directive to "extinguish all Indian title to land and to facilitate settlement of the Northwest by placing Indians on reserves" (p. 25). History has proven that this was a deliberate act of misinformation, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation by the Queen's representatives, and that is why the written treaty is different from the true spirit and original intent of Treaty 7. It was during this dark time of the early reservation era that our Elders could only tell the stories of the sacred places that were in our traditional territory, as they could not visit them without being imprisoned by the authorities. A few years ago, one of our researchers started inviting the Elders to visit the sacred places that were in our stories. Many of them were affected emotionally as they arrived at those places that they had only heard about in our stories. Many of the Elders were moved to tears as they realized that there was an actual place on earth where this story took place. Each year many of my people visit the sacred sites, remembering the stories, making offerings, giving thanks to the Creator, *Ihtsipaitapiyopa*, for giving us the gift of being in that special, significant sacred place.

Visiting these sacred places, remembering their significance, remembering the stories and why these places are sacred to the *Kainai* Blood Nation is critical to the survival of many aspects of our spiritual, cultural ways of knowing and ways of being. I made a promise to travel to all the sites within the Blackfoot Confederacy Territory when I was forty-six years old, while I was standing on the equator at 12:00 noon on March 20th—and I could not see my shadow. I have visited many sites since then, and re-visited many, but I still have many more sites to visit. When I am at these sites, I am cognizant of everything, as there are messages from my ancestors that are presented to me. I understand the messages by taking the time to sit quietly at these places and reflect upon the events that have taken place. One time I visited *Aaki Piskaan*, and I carelessly wore my Lucchese boots, I walked to the bottom of the buffalo jump and visited there; when I tried to climb back to the top I found that I could not walk upon the paths that were there, I kept sliding back down to the bottom. I stood at the bottom and reflected upon this; I prayed and made an offering of tobacco before I started to climb back to the top. I then realized that I had to create my own path to get back to the top, and when I tried to climb back up it was much easier. I spoke to my Grandmothers as I was making my way back to the top and informed them that I understood the message. Since that time, I have made my own trail in all that I have done, I have not followed anyone else's trail. Other times when I am at a crossroads and trying to decide which direction I should take, I receive a message in some form, and I understand that I am to go in a certain direction.

One of our traditional spiritual Elders once said that the Sacred Places found upon the “storied Landscape” of our traditional lands reinforces and revitalizes our understandings of who we were, and clarifies who we are, and who we can become. We are in the Present, in the Past and in the Future—all in the same span of time (Kaahsinnooniks, 2006).

Kainaysinni

In my life I have been gifted with many guides—my family, friends, Elders, mentors, and many significant written and symbolic representations that have influenced my thought, my spirit. In 1988, while my husband *Makiinima* (Roy) was still Chief of *Kainai* (Blood Tribe), he worked with the Elders of the *Kainai* Nation and developed the philosophy that stated the Indigenous Knowledge, the epistemology of *Kainai*, the inherent rights to being *Kainai*; it is known as *Kainaysinni*. When I read this document in 1988, I was in my second year of my career as a teacher at the *Saipoyi* Elementary School and we, *Kainai* had just taken control of our education system from Indian Affairs. It was at this time when the Blood Tribe Education Board embraced *Kainai* Indigenous ways of knowing into the school system. Our spirituality was integrated into the daily routine, and the Elders were present. This document empowered me and created a paradigm shift in my view of the world, it clarified and gave me direction to how I could change my life, my spirituality, and how I could transform my ways of teaching to reflect the principles embedded within the philosophy of *Kainaysinni*.

Kainaaki

I have made my offerings. I have said many prayers. Each day is a new beginning. I understand my responsibilities. Prayer and Ceremony have given me the strength to keep going. Life as a *Kainaaki* and *Siksikaitsitapaaki* (a Lady of the *Kainai* Blood Nation and of the Blackfoot Confederacy) in this world is difficult, but I will continue to use the protocol of my ancestors as I journey through this land that I call home to help change the reality of many of the *Kainai* who are members of *Siksikaitsitapi*—the Blackfoot Confederacy—and all the *Okioy'aitsitapi* (other indigenous people of the Americas) to recognise that Indigenous Ways of Spirituality will help one to become a *Niitsitapi*—a real person, that is. One who is responsible and understands that we have to honor and recognize who our ancestors are and continue to make this world we live in a better place for those children who are yet to be born.

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