

## Plains Family: a generalized outline

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– “**One’s Family**” is the heart and soul of being Indian, from which one’s identity and purpose evolve, from which the world revolves, to which one gives unselfishly.

– “**Family Love**” and **Hospitality**, derivative of the traditional value of an “ethic of sharing,” expressed in the Crow term, *Ammaakée* - “give away” (to give and share with others). This extensive family system continues to express and facilitate all-embracing “love,” hospitality and support among and between relatives, i.e., one could claim kinship and thus garner hospitality and support with an extremely wide family network. Today where there are so many challenges facing individuals – within a community that may have such high rates of illness and sickness, unemployment, alcoholism and drug abuse, crime and incarceration, inter-family misunderstandings and rivalries, and continued discrimination coming from so many venues, where death seems so prevalent with the passing of beloved elders and the many accidents – the outpouring of love and care so readily shown by family members is a powerful refuge in a sea of turmoil and confusion for so many in need of help, assistance and protection.

Among the many expressions of support of family members, providing an “**Indian name**” to a child or young person, or even adult is critical. In a ceremonial setting, such as during a community powwow, or just an evening set aside by the family at its home, a designated elder would bestow the name. A give-away would likely accompany the naming. The specific name given might have been inspired by an elder’s dream, derived from the name of a distinguished ancestor or even the action of a power animal, e.g., “dancing hawk,” or it may reflect some quality or disposition seen by an elder in the child or a quality and ability yet desired to manifest itself in that child. The Indian name will thus help provide that individual a lifetime of guidance and protection, helping him or her become that described in the words of the name. It is a name seldom used in public, reserved for prayer and the ceremonial context and known within the family.

As another expression of family love is the practice of having a **giveaway** at every important transition event in a person’s life, each rite of passage for each member of the family. Such occasions include a naming ceremony, a first kill ceremony, being a member of the team which had just won a state championship in basketball, marriage, a healing ceremony, and following the wake at a funeral and a year later at a memorial for the deceased. And the giveaway is extensive, involving gifts for every person attending the event, sometimes numbering in the hundreds. The elders would receive special acknowledgement in the quality of gift given. For the Crow, one’s clan uncles and aunts are the recipients of a large share of these gifts (see Crow Kinship). Among the gifts could be Pendleton blankets and other blankets, Pendleton bags, sections of calico cloth, various colored handkerchiefs, socks and other articles of clothing, dried meat, freshly prepared huckleberry syrup and preserves, and an assortment of small toys for the kids, most of which was new and recently purchased. At a first kill ceremony, the young hunter would even give his rifle to a prominent hunter or respected elder. A meal in abundance, with many traditional foods of roots, berries, fish and meat, would often precede the

giveaway. Provided by the extended family for the recipient of the name or healing, the giveaway reiterates the level of support and love they have for young child or grandmother, further linking him or her with the vitality and care of the entire community. Each time that handkerchief might be used or those preserves spread across a piece of toast, that child or grandmother would be remembered and a prayer of love sent forth. For a funeral and memorial, the giveaway might also include a vast array of personal items having belonged to the deceased, many of which would have been purposely assembled by the deceased during his or her life time explicitly for this purpose, and in the act of giving these and other items away, the giveaway provides a way of “sharing the sorrow with all the people, lifting the burden, and letting it go away” (*Landscape Traveled by Coyote and Crane* 2001:248).

Also expressive of family support for those in need is the widespread **visiting** and **hospitality** shown among and between extended family members; visits are always warmly welcomed. Someone could readily come for a visit to your home, for an economic need (job), a ceremonial reason (Naming, First Kill or Healing Ceremony or a Funeral and Wake), or a social reason (friendship or just a “get away”), and even take up residence there for a short time, or evolving into a potentially permanent basis. One elder always leaves his home unlocked and while at work any relative, who may be just be passing through and needs a place to take a short rest or get a bite to eat, is always welcome to stop and make themselves at home. And then when rested, they can resume their trip. He only asks that they leave the home the same way they found it. Young people, especially before marriage, are prone to make long visits elsewhere. This practice tends to promote intermarriage between families of different communities, as for example between Lapwai and Warm Springs. All this contributes to the strengthening of intergroup relations, **an expansive “family”** and the ease of mobility among its members to effectively participate in economic, social and ceremonial activities **throughout the Plains**.

– **Key Values.** In addition to the key value of hospitality and sharing toward others - *Ammaakée* - “give away,” other values expressed throughout the kinship network include: *unshat-qn* - “eye to eye,” an equality toward all as one’s peers (Schitsu’umsh); yet tremendous respect for and deference to elders; *tuk’ukí* - “honesty,” sincerity and integrity in one’s actions toward others (Nimíipuu); and *ciká-w* - “bravery” and courage in the defense of one’s family in the face of adversity (Nimíipuu). Above all is the importance of maintaining the integrity, health and wellbeing of the family and all its members. The individual is to be strong and vital in support of the health and welfare of the family and, in turn, is made strong because of the strength of the family, and not the reverse. Above all family members are compassionate and self-effacing toward each other, reserving the trickster and self-serving “Coyote” behaviors for potential adversaries often found among members of other tribes.

– **Gender Roles.** While gender roles are traditionally clearly differentiated and demarcated, e.g., males as hunters and warriors, and women as gatherers and food preparers, the Plains societies are nevertheless characterized by gender equality, with men and women ultimately having equally access to power, authority, and autonomy in their respective economic, domestic, political and religious spheres of family life. Men had little to no prerogative or authority over women’s roles, while women had little overt say

over the activities of men. Likewise, the members of each gender had full access to the power and privilege within their gender-structured roles. And when viewed community-wide, both sets of gender roles contributed equally to the wellbeing of the whole, each complementing the other. Today, while many families continue this gender role differentiation, the members of other families have begun to blur many of these gender-based distinctions.

While few in numbers, in traditional times this gender role differentiation did not preclude the possibility of a male perusing and being accepted by others into the female role, with all its responsibilities and duties, and doing so on a complete and full-time basis, nor it preclude the possibility of a woman perusing and being accepted as a “hunter” or “warrior.” This practice is generally termed, “**Two-Spirits**,” and is in fact pervasive throughout Indigenous North American. These individuals were and still are often afforded special and respected responsibilities in the community, such as healers, storytellers, mediators, artists, and often had special roles in ceremonial practices. Among the Dine (Navajo), for example, they had four recognized gender differentiated terms and corresponding roles.

– **Leadership Roles.** Within this kinship system, decisions were reserved to the elders and those with particular expertise in a particular social, economic or political activity under consideration. Elders were granted authority by others by the example they set while adhering to the key cultural values. Reflective of the equalitarian and flexible qualities of the family structure, leadership positions were typically achieved, and not ascribed or inherited roles. Any man was eligible to become a chief, though sons of former chiefs were often so elected. While no women could become a chief, speaking at social gatherings, many women were well respected for their wisdom and “chief-like qualities,” and exerted considerable influence over public opinion. Whether a village, a band, or the tribal head “chief,” their leadership position was signified by publically possessing of a “stone pipe.” The role of the chief, often referred to as “headmen,” was at all levels advisory and not authoritarian. They led by their example and ruled by consensus. Headmen, whether village or band, had no coercive, punitive or dictatorial powers. There was thus no necessity to have a “police society” per se to carry out and enforce the decisions of the headmen. Skills in oratory and gentle persuasion were the means to build consensus.

The influence of the headmen were often first articulated and then expressed through the actions of the village and band council meetings. Made up of the village elders, the headmen would facilitate the ensuing discussion during the council meetings. But any decision arrived at was by the consensus of all the elders, based upon the welfare sought for the entire village or band. When the pipe was finally smoked at these councils, the decisions agreed to were binding by all families represented by the elders in attendance.

The influence of the headmen was also expressed at the talks and storytelling sessions held during the winter ceremonies and social gatherings. The headmen encouraged the people to conduct themselves properly and morally, and to be industrious. They would emphasize the importance of cooperation and generosity. “Don’t put yourself above others.” As Lawrence Aripa (Schitsu’umsh) recalls his father saying, “if you look down your nose at someone else, all you’ll see are your moccasins,” followed by a big laugh. The headmen would also publicly admonish those who were acting selfishly, quarrelsome, or

cowardly, calling them “coyote.” In fact, the most important social control of deviant behavior was in public joking and ridicule, and, if necessary, the threat of ostracism. A “thief” or “vain” person would be laughed at and socially isolated from his or her family. Lawrence Aripa and his uncle Felix, both tell of a man named, “Cosechin,” who was “mean and no good.” The only way to control his “cruel ways” was to “banish him” into the mountains. While a hospitable landscape for the families, to attempt to live alone in this landscape was to assure one’s own demise.

The ultimate responsibility of the headmen was always to attend to the general health, safety and welfare of all members of their respective villages, bands or extended families, seeing to it that no individuals or particular families went without proper provisions and assistance throughout the year. There’s was a nurturing role. They would help regulate and distribute community food stores and other supplies to all in need. If someone was struggling in some endeavor or activity, the headmen would see that assistance was provided. A headman would continue to provide these nurturing and leadership roles so long as his decisions were sound and his actions moral. He ruled by the consensus of those he represented.

In addition to the village or band headmen, specific ad hoc leaders would also be selected for particular gender-related tasks. In the communal hunts, root gathering and in warfare, separate hunting headmen, gathering headwomen and “war chiefs” would be elected, but serving in that capacity only for the duration of the activity at hand. Men and women so elected had distinguished themselves as great hunters, root gatherers or warriors, possessing expert knowledge and perhaps spiritual power – *baaxpée* (Crow) – relating to their particular skills. And like the role of village headmen, the more specialized hunting headmen and gathering women would supervise the redistribution of the game meat, roots and fish, assuring that those in need were all cared for.

This generalized Plains family outline is shared by the Plateau family. Among any given Plains tribe variation and unique family structures and roles there will be expressed.