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Displays of Personal Adornment and Body Decoration by Nineteenth Century Lakota (Sioux) Tribes: A Costly Signaling Model

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DISPLAYS OF PERSONAL ADORNMENT AND BODY DECORATION BY
NINETEENTH CENTURY LAKOTA (SIOUX) TRIBES:
A COSTLY SIGNALING MODEL

by
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Throughout the nineteenth century, Lakota (Sioux) individuals devoted an enormous amount of time, energy, and resources to the production and purchase of lavish clothing, headdresses, and accessories. These items seemingly lack any practical value, making them difficult to account for in economic terms. Costly signaling theory, however, predicts that the costs of the production of personal adornment and body decoration may be offset by the accumulation of prestige. For Lakota men, prestige translated into higher status, membership in warrior and headmen's societies, leadership opportunities, marital opportunities, and ultimately, differential reproductive success. Lakota women also garnered prestige based on the quality and quantity of the elaborately decorated goods they produced, benefitting themselves, their families, and their kin groups. This study will explore the multitude of ways that prestige was signaled by males and females both within and between Lakota societies, as well as the social benefits that were accrued as a result of this signaling behavior.
# Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES iv

Chapter 1- INTRODUCTION 1
1.1 Hypotheses 2
1.2 Definition of Terms 3
1.3 Significance 4

Chapter 2- LITERATURE REVIEW 8
2.1 Costly Signaling Theory 8
2.2 Art in Anthropological Perspective 13
2.3 Self-decoration in Anthropological Perspective 21
2.4 Evolutionary Aesthetics 24
2.5 Costly Signaling Explanations of Art and Adornment 27
2.6 Personal Adornment in Lakota Society 31
2.7 Summary 32

Chapter 3- ETHNOHISTORIC DATA 35
3.1 Lakota Ethnohistory 35
3.2 Lakota Social Organization 40
3.3 Oglala Leadership Structure 42
3.4 Signaling of Military Prowess by Lakota Men 48
3.5 Costly Signaling through Men’s Society Regalia 55
3.6 Indigenous and Euro-American Trade Goods as Costly Signals 68
3.7 Marriage, Polygyny, and the Role of Women in the Fur Trade 78
3.8 Signals of Skill and Prestige by Lakota Women 81
3.9 Women’s Societies and Medicine Cults 104
3.10 Ceremonies, Feasting, Give-Aways, and Dances as Costly Signaling 109
3.11 Summary 118

Chapter 4- FINDINGS 120
4.1 Hypothesis 1: Costliness of Signals 120
4.2 Hypothesis 2: Maintaining Signal Integrity 124
4.3 Hypothesis 3: Individual and Societal Benefits of Costly Signaling 130
4.4 Summary 135

Chapter 5- CONCLUSION 139

REFERENCES CITED 150
List of Figures

Figure 3.1. Man’s Hair Shirt 44
Figure 3.2. Man’s Hair Shirt 45
Figure 3.3. A Man Who Killed an Enemy 50
Figure 3.4. A Man Who Killed Two Enemies 51
Figure 3.5. Painted Bison Robe 53
Figure 3.6. Shield picturing battle exploits of Chief Hump 54
Figure 3.7. Kit Fox Society Leader 57
Figure 3.8. Lance Bearer of the Brave Hearts 60
Figure 3.9. Leader of the Sotka Society 62
Figure 3.10. Lance Bearer of the Sotka Society 63
Figure 3.11. Eagle Feather Headdress 64
Figure 3.12. Bear Claw Necklace with James Buchanan Peace Medal 71
Figure 3.13. Give Away Horses Dress 83
Figure 3.14. Woman’s Side Fold Dress 85
Figure 3.15. Girl’s Two-skin Dress 86
Figure 3.16. Woman’s Two-skin Dress 87
Figure 3.17. Woman’s Three-skin Dress 89
Figure 3.18. Girl’s Three-skin Dress 90
Figure 3.19. “Green River” Knife and Sheath 92
Figure 3.20. Girl’s Dress 93
Figure 3.21. Girl’s Belt and Accessories 94
Figure 3.22. Girl’s Moccasins with Beaded Soles 95
Figure 3.23. Beaded Cradleboard 98
Figure 3.24. Beaded Saddle Blanket 100
Figure 3.25. Horse Hoof Ornaments 101
Figure 3.26. Bison Horn Horse Mask 102
Figure 3.27. Beaded Horse Mask 103
Figure 3.28. Quilled Bag with Spider Design 107
Figure 3.29. Sioux Mother and Baby 112
Figure 3.30. Sioux Mother with a Baby in a Cradleboard 114
Figure 4.1. A Heyoka Warrior 127
Chapter 1

Introduction

The eighteenth and nineteenth century Lakota (Sioux) people of the northern Plains invested significant time and resources in the production of lavish clothing, spectacular headdresses and regalia, jewelry, body paint, and elaborately decorated personal items. From an evolutionary perspective, this constitutes “economically irrational behavior” since energy and resources that could have enhanced the survival of individuals and kin are instead essentially wasted (Bliege Bird and Smith 2005:223). Costly signaling theory, however, predicts that the costs of this seemingly wasteful behavior may be offset by the accumulation of symbolic capital, resulting in higher individual, family, and kin group status and prestige. Ultimately, this symbolic capital is translated into differential survival and reproductive success for the signalers.

This study will develop a costly signaling model of body decoration and personal adornment based on ethnohistoric and ethnographic data on the nineteenth century Lakota, in order to ascertain the socio-cultural function and adaptive significance of this cultural phenomenon. It will be demonstrated that body decoration and personal adornment were vital elements of within-group (intra-band) Lakota social negotiations, and that these elaborate displays served to garner prestige, which translated into higher status for the signaler’s family and kin group. This social capital, in turn, led to expanded leadership opportunities, enhanced marital opportunities, and preferential treatment for one’s self, spouse(s), children, and kin. It will also be demonstrated that costly signaling through personal adornment contributed to intra-tribal power negotiations, as Lakota tribes competed against each other for important camping spots, hunting areas, trading
opportunities, and influential leadership positions. Further, it will be demonstrated that costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment contributed to the unprecedented success of the Lakota tribes on the Great Plains, allowing them to continually expand their territory, exponentially grow their population, control access to bison herds and the lucrative fur trade, and subdue their enemies. Finally, it will be demonstrated that the economic and social costs of body decoration and personal adornment guaranteed their honesty as signals of wealth, status, and power, and that innovation and intensification of body decoration and adornment became necessary over time to ensure that these social signals remained costly and honest, or hard-to-fake.

1.1 Hypotheses

The primary objective of this study is to illustrate that displays of body decoration and personal adornment by nineteenth century Lakota individuals operated as costly signals of prestige and skill, enhancing the social and reproductive success of the signaler; furthermore, this costly signaling was an important social organizing mechanism that enhanced military cooperation and contributed to the overall success of Lakota bands and tribes. Specifically, three hypotheses will be tested.

Hypothesis 1: Displays of body decoration and personal adornment by nineteenth century Lakota tribal members operated as social signals of prestige and skill, and were costly in terms of energy and resources. These costs guaranteed that only those individuals who could bear them would be able to produce the displays.

Hypothesis 2: Costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment by Lakota tribal members reliably indicated some hidden trait or characteristic of the signaler, and in order to maintain the honesty of these signals, some social mechanism operated to prevent free-riders from faking signals.

Hypothesis 3: Costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment by Lakota individuals was beneficial to both the signaler
and receiver, resulting in a payoff of enhanced prestige at the level of the individual.

These hypotheses will be tested against data drawn from three main lines of evidence. Autobiographical data from Lakota authors including Luther Standing Bear, Susan Betyloun Bordeaux, and Ella Deloria will be presented, illustrating how body art and personal adornment were viewed from within the perspective of Lakota society. Lakota ethnographic data collected by Wissler, Walker, Dorsey, Hassrick, and DeMallie will be examined in order to reconstruct the multitude of ways that body art and personal adornment operated as costly signaling. First-hand historical accounts of Lakota society recorded by Lewis & Clark, Catlin, and others Plains explorers, artists, and fur-traders will be presented in order to understand how costly signals evolved over the course of the nineteenth century. Lakota population data collected by Kingsley Bray will also be utilized in order to track the explosive growth experienced by Lakota tribes from 1700-1880. In line with the predictions of costly signaling theory, it will be shown that increasing social differentiation caused by population expansion, wealth accumulation, and external pressure created a unique opportunity for a complex system of social signaling through body art and personal adornment to develop.

1.2 Definition of Terms

Body decoration and personal adornment are cultural universals, but vary widely cross-culturally. Personal adornment refers to items that are worn: feathers, jewelry, animal skins, and decorated clothing and accessories. Body decoration includes temporary or permanent marks and body modifications: face and body paint, tattoos, ritual scars, elongated ears and necks, flattened heads, bound feet, lip plates, piercings, hairdressing, and tooth filing and pulling (Ember and Ember 2011; Schwarz 1979).
Body decoration and personal adornment are part of a broader category of what, in the past, has been referred to as primitive, indigenous, or tribal art, but is today simply called “art”. Art is an expansive category, but can be most readily grouped into artifacts and performances. According to Dutton (2009:51-52), artifacts consist of “sculptures, paintings, and decorated objects such as tools or the human body, and scores and texts considered as objects” while performances are “dances, music, and the composition and recitation of stories.” While art has been continually redefined throughout the history of anthropology and related disciplines, it does have a few qualities that are widely agreed upon.

It expresses as well as communicates. It stimulates the senses, affects emotions, and evokes ideas. It is produced in culturally patterned ways and styles. It has cultural meaning. In addition, some people are thought to be better at it than others. Art does not require some people to be full-time artistic specialists of any kind. But, although everyone in some societies may participate in some arts (dancing, singing, body decoration), it is usually thought that some people have superior artistic skill (Ember and Ember 2011:290).

1.3 Significance

Body decoration and personal adornment are cultural universals, with every known human culture devoting at least a modicum of time and resources to self-decoration (Miller 2000; Miller 2001; Dissanayake 2003; Dutton 2009; Coote and Shelton 1992). In less complex, egalitarian societies leveling mechanisms in the form of social disapproval discourage excessive displays of personal adornment; however, in larger, more complex societies body decoration and personal adornment become a social arena in which status and prestige are negotiated, presumably, through the process of costly signaling. An ethnographically-based costly signaling model of body decoration and personal adornment makes significant contributions to a number of distinct bodies of anthropological research.
including visual anthropology, the anthropology of art, evolutionary aesthetics, evolutionary anthropology and archaeology, and costly signaling theory. The manner in which self-decoration has been addressed within these areas of research will be detailed in sections 2.2-2.5.

A costly signaling explanation of body decoration and personal adornment also constitutes a significant contribution to the practice of museum anthropology and Native American studies. The lavish clothing, regalia, and art of the Lakota have been subjects of scholarly interest since the late nineteenth century. Much of this research has been descriptive and classificatory in nature, characteristic of the cultural historical paradigm which dominated Plains research for the better half of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1980s, a few studies began looking at the production and display of Lakota art and adornment as key factors in social negotiations; for the most part, this research was conducted from either feminist or post-modernist perspectives (Albers 1983; Schneider 1983; Bol 1985; Gombert 1994). These researchers generally concluded that artistic elaboration, body decoration, and personal adornment among the Lakota served to garner prestige, enhance status, display wealth, and advertise military prowess. A costly signaling explanation, while reaching similar conclusions, takes this argument a step further by situating it within the theoretical framework of evolutionary theory. This allows for additional questions to be posed concerning the mechanisms by which status and prestige are conferred and to explore the particular historical and social factors underpinning this system and causing it to intensify over time. Previous research may have identified and described the phenomenon, but a costly signaling explanation has the potential explore the how's and why's of the phenomenon, to make predictions about when
and where the phenomenon might be likely to manifest, and to package it in a manner that makes it relevant for understanding the connections between self-decoration and cultural success from an evolutionary and cross-cultural perspective. These links, once forged, would presumably be of interest to researchers and scholars attempting to understand how Lakota culture and social organization were completely transformed over the course of the nineteenth century, becoming increasingly complex within a relatively short period of time. This information may also be of interest to the many museums across the U.S. who are concerned with displaying and interpreting the fabulously decorated clothing and regalia of the Lakota culture. In addition, this information would likely be of interest to the Lakota people themselves: the tribal members, council members, educators, and historians who are stakeholders in any interpretation of the social functions of their beautifully decorated cultural properties.

A costly signaling explanation of Lakota body decoration and personal adornment would also be useful for researchers concerned with visual anthropology, the anthropology of art, evolutionary aesthetics, and costly signaling theory. While the decorated clothing, sculpture, pottery, and masks of indigenous and tribal societies have always been of interest to anthropologists and archaeologists, a detailed understanding of how these items of art and adornment function within human societies is generally lacking. Reframing art production and self-adornment as costly signaling serves to make seemingly irrational expenditures of time, energy, and resources comprehensible: these costs allow for the accumulation of social capital, ultimately enhancing individual and kin group prestige, as well as the prestige of one’s band and tribe. A thorough examination of the way in which body decoration and personal adornment functioned within Lakota society provides a rich
illustration of the many ways in which socially important, but hidden, information can be broadcast, benefiting both the signaler and the receiver, as well as the group.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Costly Signaling Theory

Costly signaling theory is ultimately rooted in Darwin's inability to explain animal ornamentation through natural selection (Miller 2000). How could an ostentatious trait like a peacock's tail possibly enhance an individual's survival? Darwin's answer, of course, was sexual selection through mate choice, an idea formalized decades later with Fisher's idea of fitness indicators causing runaway selection. These ideas were again distilled in the 1970s by Zahavi (1975), whose handicap principal claimed that the high cost of ornamentation, in survival terms, guaranteed its reliability as a fitness indicator. A brightly colored individual is handicapped, essentially, by virtue of being more visible to predators, and only a genetically superior specimen can bear that cost. Females, genetically predisposed to receiving this "costly" signal, choose to mate with more ornately ornamented males, and both the ornamentation and the preference for the ornamentation are passed to the next generation. Costly signaling theory need not be restricted to ornamentation and bird plumage, however; Zahavi argued that this process was applicable to human culture (Zahavi 1975; Zahavi 1978).

During the century that signaling theory as sexual selection was being worked out by evolutionary biologists, ideas mirroring signaling theory were also being offered by social scientists and economists such as Veblen (1994 [1899]) and Bourdieu (1977). Thorstein Veblen's (1994 [1899]) The Theory of the Leisure Class coined the term conspicuous consumption to explain the advertising of wealth and status so predominant among Victorian elites of his era. This consumption and display of luxury goods,
according to Veblen, was increasingly important in a large and mobile society in which it was difficult to gauge the wealth of one's peers. As a result, costly and wasteful artistic elaboration and personal ornamentation became the means by which elites displayed their wealth and socially competed for status, allies, and most importantly, mates. Of course Veblen, like Zahavi, did not intend for his theory to be narrowly applied, and instead viewed it as a characteristic of human cultures across time and space (Miller 2000).

As pointed out by Bliege Bird and Smith (2005), Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption shares many features with Bourdieu's (1977) idea of symbolic capital, and both can be considered early forms of signaling theory. As defined by Bliege Bird and Smith, costly signaling operates as individual strategizing when the costs of "economically irrational behavior" are

outweighed by the benefits gained through manipulating social relationships with other individuals. The apparent paradox of wastefully expending time and wealth is dissolved if the cost of the display functions to ensure that only high-quality individuals can afford them at all. Thus, the signal value of conspicuous consumption is maintained by its costs; these costs in turn are the price wealthy individuals pay for prestige (2005:223).

Bliege Bird and Smith go on to say, however, that there are still two elements missing from these early forms of costly signaling theory. The first deals with how costs ensure honesty. The second element deals with the mechanism by which an honest signal confers prestige (or status, quality, fitness), or more specifically, why the receiver defers to the signaler. Bliege Bird and Smith emphasize this point by asking the provocative question, "Why tolerate inequality?" (2005:223).

As with any evolutionary conundrum, the general answer to this question is that responding to the signal and deferring is more beneficial to the receiver than ignoring the signal, in terms of survival and/or reproduction. While this concept seems counterintuitive
when considering inequality and prestige, it makes much better sense in other contexts. Consider the example of prey/predator signaling offered by Bliege Bird and Smith (2005), as well as Cronk (2005), in which ungulates display a rump patch to signal their fitness to a predator before escaping, thereby attracting the predator's attention. This paradoxical behavior is explained by the fact that the signal is mutually beneficial to the predator and the prey: both save valuable time and energy that may have been wasted in a lengthy pursuit. Cronk (2005) discusses further this idea of signaling as mutually beneficial:

> costly signaling theory is relevant to circumstances in which there are broad conflicts of interests between categories of signalers and receivers but confluences of interest – common interests that are real though they may be fleeting – between particular signalers and particular receivers (2005:612, author’s emphasis).

Roscoe (2009) presents a signaling model of small-scale societies in contact-era New Guinea which nicely illustrates how costly signaling can effectively manage conflicts of interest both within and between groups. Roscoe argues that New Guinean groups signal hidden qualities to potential allies and enemies through three forms of display: conspicuous distribution, conspicuous performance and conspicuous construction. These displays are honest and costly signals of a group's military strength, and serve as a means to substitute "symbolic violence for real violence" (Roscoe 2009:88). According to Roscoe, New Guineans, as well as humans in other small-scale societies, utilize social signaling in an effort to reduce the costs of violence caused by competition for mates and resources.

> They substituted symbolic fighting on a ceremonial plaza for actual fighting on a battlefield. Rather than take up arms and resort to dangerous or lethal combat, they instead took up material distributions, exhibitions of singing and dancing, and monumental architecture and resorted to symbolic combat, to displays that reliably communicated who would win a fight to the death without anyone having to engage in an actual fight to the death. By honestly displaying- rather than actively deploying- their military capacity, every individual, every subgroup,
and every group in the system was able reliably to determine who would win a physical fight over a conflict of interest without any individual or unit having to risk the actual mortal combat that would jeopardize their individual interests in survival and their collective interests in cooperative action (Roscoe 2009:90, author's emphasis).

Roscoe's model elegantly addresses the adaptive significance of pot latching, gift-giving, music, dance, monumental architecture, and personal adornment.

In his comments to Bliege Bird and Smith (2005), Alvard reflects upon this efficacy of signaling theory in explaining the "symbolic and ritual behavior that has otherwise been put down by many anthropologists to the capriciousness of culture" (2005:238). Signaling theory is significant not only because it has the capacity to address such a wide breadth of human behavior, but because the dynamic behaviors that it attempts to explain have long remained elusive to evolutionary theorists. The recent flurry of publication of costly signaling models and hypotheses attests to this significance.

A costly signaling model has been offered to account for cooperation in human groups (Gintis, Smith, and Bowles 2001) and McAndrew (2002) invokes signaling as an explanation for altruism. A number of costly signaling articles view religion as a signal of commitment or cooperation promoting group cohesion (Henrich 2009; Irons 2001; Sosis 2000; Sosis 2003; Sosis and Bressler 2003; Sosis and Alcorta 2003; Sosis, Kress, and Boster 2007). Boone, on the contrary, offered a costly signaling explanation of pot-latching and ritual as a conspicuous expenditure, or waste intended to garner prestige and access to resources during times of stress (Boone 1998). Hagen and Bryant (2003) explain music and dance as signals of coalitional quality and strength, closely mirroring Roscoe's (2009) view of conspicuous performances as social signals of military strength. A number of different studies have explored feasting and generosity as costly signals of
strength, wealth, or status/prestige (Bliege Bird and Smith 2005; Bliege Bird et al. 2001; Boone 1998; Gurven et al. 2000; Smith and Bliege Bird 2000; Smith, Bleige Bird, and Bird 2003; Roscoe 2009). Nieman (1997), Trigger (1990), and Wandsnider (2011) have analyzed monumental architecture as costly signals of individual or group quality, as well as demonstrations of power. Plourde (2009) presented a costly signaling model of prestige goods as related to the formation of political hierarchies, and a (2008) game theoretic model of prestige goods as signals of skill. Godoy et al. (2007) conducted a study on status signaling through the consumption of prestige goods among the Tsimane of Bolivia, as this traditional society transitions to a market economy. The common link unifying these various costly signaling hypotheses is the idea that “seemingly maladaptive and otherwise inexplicable” facets of human culture are, instead, viewed as critical components of individual and group success (Alvard 2003:147). According to Winterhalder and Smith (2000:67), costly signaling theory has the potential to “help explain how complex social institutions and processes (such as social stratification) can emerge from adaptively directed individual decisions interacting with historical constraints.”

Considering the breadth of applications of signaling theory, as well as the sheer number of publications it has generated, it seems like an oversight that very little has been written on artistic elaboration or personal adornment as costly signaling. While artistic elaboration is a cultural universal and people everywhere spend a good deal of time and energy producing painstakingly decorated objects, as well as decorating and adorning their bodies, very few ethnographically based signaling models have addressed the phenomenon. Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) point out that signaling theory has the potential to explain the adaptive significance of visual artistic and craft traditions, but go on to say that rigorous
empirical tests are still lacking. In order to demonstrate that costly signaling theory has explanatory value for artistic elaboration and self-adornment, future research must focus on how art production and self-decoration affect social negotiations in specific cultural and historic contexts (see Roscoe 2009). A costly signaling explanation of Lakota body decoration and adornment would constitute a step towards the formation of a costly signaling model of artistic elaboration and personal adornment.

Before detailing the ethnographic and ethnohistoric data on Lakota body decoration and adornment, it will first be necessary to review past approaches to art and adornment over time and in different disciplines. First, a brief history of the anthropology of art will be discussed, after which research specifically focusing on body decoration and personal adornment will be reviewed. This will be followed by a review of evolutionary approaches to art, aesthetics, and adornment, including costly signaling explanations of artistic elaboration and self-decoration. Finally, previous research on Lakota body decoration and personal adornment will be discussed. This overview, detailing a variety of different approaches to artistic elaboration and self-decoration, will underline the need for a systematic anthropological approach to cross-cultural variation in art and adornment.

2.2 Art in Anthropological Perspective

In Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics (1992:2-3), Coote and Shelton discuss how art has been approached by anthropologists since the formation of the discipline in the late nineteenth century.

The history of the anthropological study of art is not easily distinguished from the history of anthropology in general. The ‘isms’ have been the same and in the same order: evolutionism, diffusionism, functionalism, structural functionalism, structuralism, post-structuralism.

As a result of these discipline-wide paradigmatic shifts, a “unified theoretical approach to
the anthropological study of art” has never developed (Coote and Shelton 1992:3). Van Damme (2003:231) made a similar observation, noting that the newness of the terms “anthropology of art” and “anthropology of aesthetics” reveal that “historically, the anthropological study of art has scarcely been conceptualized and operationalized in any methodic sense… the anthropology of art can only with difficulty be interpreted as implying a systematic view on research into the visual arts.” Van Damme (2003:235) also notes that “the existence of a specific anthropological approach to the arts is often assumed, but the question of what it might actually consist of is only seldom explicitly raised and discussed.” How has this come to pass?

When anthropology was established as a discipline, “primitive art” was very much at the forefront of research. Edward Tylor included art in his classic definition of culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871 [1958]:1). Early (non-Darwinian) evolutionary anthropologists treated art as an indicator of cultural complexity, using it to corroborate their unilinear conceptualization of cultural evolution. From this perspective, the art, religion, and social organization of human societies progressed through predictable stages from simple to complex, culminating in Victorian European society, complete with its well-established artistic traditions and conventions.

Franz Boas rejected this notion of orthogenesis, opting instead for an early form of cultural relativism and historical particularism. Boas believed that cultural variation was the result of the history of each particular society combined with the influence of different groups they came in contact with during regional migrations; in short, he argued that humans everywhere were the same, made different only by each group’s history (Boas
In Primitive Art (1927 [1955]:7), Boas set out to “determine the dynamic conditions under which art styles grow up”, presenting an overview of cross-cultural variation in the symmetry, rhythm, and form of indigenous art. He pointed out that art production is a human universal, saying “the very existence of song, dance, painting or sculpture among all the tribes known to us is proof of the craving to produce things that are felt as satisfying through their form, and the capability of man to enjoy them” (Boas 1927 [1955]:9). This “craving” or “need” to produce art would continue to be commented on for decades by anthropologists, although has only recently been seriously addressed.

Boas and his students pioneered the anthropological tradition of field research and published extensively, documenting the art, music, dance, and ritual behavior of many Native American cultures, as well as cultures from around the world (Morphy and Perkins 2006). During the same era, anthropologists affiliated with the American Bureau of Ethnology amassed and catalogued huge collections of decorated clothing, regalia, weapons, and art from Native American groups recently confined to reservations, as well as from tribal societies all over the world. These impressive collections of indigenous art, along with the ethnographic data collected by Boasian anthropologists, however, were never utilized to construct theories regarding the role of art within society. Instead Boas and his students, following the lead of many British anthropologists of the period, became single-mindedly focused on pattern and style in art and artifacts, helping to usher in the cultural-historical paradigm, which dominated the archaeology and the anthropology of art until the mid-twentieth century. Anthropologists and archaeologists operating from this research perspective were primarily concerned with reconstructing large-scale migrations and cultural diffusion patterns based on similarities and differences in the pattern and style
of art and artifacts.

This sort of study was conducted on the ethnography, art, and adornment of Lakota tribes at the beginning of the twentieth century, and provides an excellent illustration of how the Boasian approach operated. Clark Wissler, a student of Franz Boas, arrived at the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1902 and with the help of a number of associates, interpreters, and informants working diligently for over fifteen years, documented an enormous amount of data regarding Lakota kinship systems and band structure, dialects, design symbolism, mythology, ritual and ceremony, and men’s and women’s societies (Walker 1982).

DeMallie discusses Wissler’s approach.

The overall plan was to reconstruct a developmental history of Plains Indian culture by mapping the similarities and dissimilarities of these elements from one tribe to the next, thereby revealing historical interrelationships. By comparing these static phenomena among the various tribes, they hoped to reconstruct dynamic relationships that would give anthropologists a better understanding of how a homogeneous culture area, like the Plains, came to develop from heterogeneous sources (Walker 1982:x).

While Wissler’s diffusionist plan never came to fruition, he deserves credit for documenting a culture whose knowledgeable informants were aging and whose traditional way of life had ceased to exist. In a letter written from the field in 1902 to the American Museum of Natural History, Wissler commented that his research with the Lakota was the most interesting fieldwork he ever undertook; while this extensive data on art, adornment, and social organization were never utilized in the formation of broader theories of how art functions within society, the Boasian contribution to American anthropology was immeasurable.

In the 1920s, as archaeology continued along the cultural-historical/diffusionist trajectory, American cultural anthropologists began to shift away from building their
ethnology collections and museum-based studies of material culture and into long-term field research, which allowed them to experience social dynamics first-hand (Morphy and Perkins 2006). At this same time in post-World War I Britain, the structural functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski ushered in the “functionalist revolution.” From this point until the 1950s, anthropologists would employ a comparative approach to the social structure of different groups in order to understand how different components of culture functioned to create the whole. While art, as a cultural component, could easily have fit into the functionalist paradigm, very little research into how art functioned within human societies was published. One exception is Malinowski’s extensive description of the Kula ring of the Trobriand Islanders, in which exchange partners built status and solidarity through the ceremonial exchange of Kula objects, usually jewelry; however, it was the exchange relationship and not the social function of the objects themselves that interested Malinowski.

In *Elements of Social Organization* (1951), Raymond Firth finally posed the question, “What does art *do* in a primitive society?” (Firth 1951:162, author’s emphasis). As a structural functionalist who was trained as an economist, as well as a student of Malinowski, Firth was well-situated to ask this question. He began by identifying two basic social issues related to art; the first dealt with how the production and use of objects of art affected the system of social relations. The second issue concerned the “nature of the values which are expressed by the formal characteristics of the art objects;” in other words, how the symbolism used in artwork corresponds to the “system of social relations” (Firth 1951:162). Firth identified a number of ways in which art affected, and was affected by, social relationships. He viewed art as supporting, rather than challenging, class structures
where they existed and argued that art represented and supported the position of chiefs and high ranking men, reinforcing community bonds. In his discussion of Sepik art and kin-group symbolism, Firth focused on the ability of art to “illustrate and crystallize the opposition of these groups,” allowing kin groups to maintain and enhance their status (Firth 1951:169). Firth also recognized a status component to art production and display by individuals, noting that in every society, as far as he knew, art enhanced one’s reputation.

By the time that Firth began questioning the social function of art, anthropology had already to a large degree shifted away from structural functionalism on the grounds that it was ahistorical, reductionist, and oversimplified. In *The Anthropology of Art* (1981:43), Robert Layton discusses Leach’s scathing critique of followers of Radcliffe-Brown in the early 1960s, calling those who engaged in reductionist cross-cultural comparative research “anthropological butterfly collectors” whose only interest was comparing the similarities and differences of things “according to the whim of the moment.”

This misunderstood reinterpretation of the idea of cultural relativism has been embraced by mainstream anthropology to the degree that comparative studies of any sort have been essentially viewed as ripping cultural elements out of their ethnographic context. The new cultural relativism commanded that the art of a specific group could only be understood through the lens of the culture that produced it, and any attempts to discern an underlying function of art across human cultures has been viewed as misguided. This idea was reinforced in the 1950s by the concept of methodological individualism, which shifted anthropological focus from the group or societal level of inquiry to the level of the individual actor, eventually maturing into a discipline-wide distaste for comparing art and
decoration cross-culturally; as a result, cultural relativism has been blamed in recent years for the lack of a systematic comparative anthropological approach to art in human societies (Dissanayake 2003; Dutton 2009; Trigger 2003; Van Damme 2003). According to Trigger (2003:10), postmodernism has encouraged an extreme form of cultural relativism which denies that “any effective form of cross-cultural comparison is possible- a position that essentially eliminates the basis for anthropology as a comparative study of human behavior.” Dissanayake (2003:246) noted that the overt acceptance of cultural relativism has left contemporary anthropological approaches to art bereft of a theoretical base to guide research, resulting in “a conglomeration of unrelated individual accounts” which are “little more than pretty baubles, of momentary interest perhaps, but without relevance to anything else.” Van Damme (2003:233) has appealed to anthropologists to re-engage in cross-cultural, comparative, and empirical research which systematically addresses fundamental issues in the arts, including “issues of origin and development, style and reference, production, reception, and reflection, patterns of use and function, innovation and diffusion.”

One major impediment to a cross-cultural, comparative, empirical, and systematic anthropology of art involves how art has been defined for most of the history of the discipline. From the nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century, art was considered a “Western category with no equivalence in most societies” (Morphy and Perkins 2006). The art of non-Western societies was first “primitive” art, then “utilitarian” art. Western art was perceived to have a long and deep history, and was “art for art’s sake” while indigenous and tribal arts were called “crafts” and were in a separate category all together. It has only been since the latter half of the twentieth century that art historians
have incorporated non-Western art into the scope of their research, although since then they appear to have matched or even eclipsed anthropological inquiry into the arts. Van Damme (2003) points out that these art historians operate much like anthropologists, engaging in field work and adopting a holistic perspective, and that their insights are beginning to impact their discipline.

Another impediment to the development of a cross-cultural, empirical, and systematic anthropology of art is the multitude of ways in which art has been approached by anthropologists. Since the 1950s and 1960s, anthropological approaches to art have distilled into a handful of different areas of inquiry. Anthropologists focusing on aesthetics tend to be concerned with the objects of art themselves, rather than art’s social, symbolic, or communicative roles (Gell 1992). The anthropology of aesthetics can be defined as “the study of the perceptual bases of indigenous evaluative processes” (Coote and Shelton 1992:9); in other words, “it is the basic task of the anthropology of aesthetics to investigate how people from other cultures ‘see’ the world” through an examination of a group’s art forms and styles (Coote and Shelton 1992:9). Sociological approaches to art, on the other hand, are concerned with the power of art to mark social distinctions and are associated with Bourdieu and, ultimately, Durkheim’s late nineteenth century writings on totemic representations as clan badges marking a group’s place in society (Gell 1992; Layton 1981). Anthropologists focusing on iconography and iconology are also concerned with totemic representations and symbolism as expressed through the use of motifs, but tend to look at art as analogous to writing or language, and are less concerned with how art functions in society. Likewise, archaeologists, for most of the twentieth century, conducted stylistic analyses of artifact variability and distribution, but primarily treated style as if it were “a
phenomenon without a function” (Wobst 1977:318). The sum total of these various approaches, after more than one hundred years of anthropological inquiry, is that the very simple question asked by Firth (1951:162), “What does art do in a primitive society?” has yet to be sufficiently addressed.

Uniting these diverse anthropological approaches to art, however, is one basic assumption: art communicates information. Like language, art is nearly always viewed as a human universal which serves to communicate social information and ideas. Different theoretical perspectives may disagree on who the audience is, precisely what information is being communicated, or how art carries a message, but few disagree that art is a medium of communication. Perhaps this explains why humans are so fascinated with the art of other cultures; from rock-art, masks, and self-decoration to dance, music, and song, and ultimately, pyramids, temples, and other forms of monumental architecture, it seems that we all perceive that messages are being communicated. Cut off from the cultural context in which these works of art were originally embedded and unable to receive the intended information, we can only feel the emotional impact and continually wonder, “What are these objects trying to tell us?”

2.3 Self-decoration in Anthropological Perspective

While systematic research regarding the function of art within societies has been neglected to a large degree by anthropologists, the role of self-decoration is better understood. Ember and Ember (2011:290) suggest three functions of body decoration and adornment, the first of which is “satisfying aesthetic needs.” Exactly what these needs are, and whether they are cultural, social, or biological in nature, is not addressed. Ember and Ember suggest that body decoration and adornment serve to delineate social position, rank,
sex, occupation, ethnic identity, or religion within a society, and point out that “along with social stratification come visual means of declaring status” (2011:290). Additionally, they discuss the erotic significance of body decoration, noting that women use cosmetics, paint, jewelry, and clothing to draw attention to erogenous zones. Men do this also, with facial hair, tattoos, ritual scars, and penis gourds (Ember and Ember 2011).

Roach and Eicher (1979:20) define personal adornment as “a communicative symbol that serves crucial functions within human lives” and outline a number of personal and social functions of adornment. It can define social roles, communicate statements of social worth, and indicate economic status. Adornment can indicate magico-religious condition and political affiliation, while also serving to reinforce beliefs, customs, and values. Personal adornment also plays an important role in social rituals and rites of passage, and additionally can be used for the purpose of sexual enticement. Roach and Eicher argue that adornment stimulates an aesthetic response while conveying other significant social and psychological messages. Body decoration and personal adornment also function to tie communities together and bind people into close-knit groups (Roach and Eicher 1979).

Early attempts by anthropologists to explain body decoration and personal adornment focused on the attraction hypothesis (Schwarz 1979). Westermarck (1891) viewed the original function of clothing as attracting sexual interest by focusing attention on genitals and erogenous zones. In the 1930s, Ruth Benedict and her generation of ethnographers rejected the erotic attraction explanation of adornment and instead focused on its role in social differentiation. Benedict discussed how Plains dress, for males, served as “a heraldic display of war counts”; in addition, she noted that “on the Northwest coast a
man’s hat will be built up in cumulative units to designate his rank” (1931:236). Bunzel (1929:1) concurred that ornamentation was an important component of human culture, defining decorative style as “the mode of plastic expression characteristic of any group at any given time.” Bunzel noted that the acceptable limits of aesthetic style in any society were culturally determined, yet constantly shifting in response to individual innovations.

From the 1950s through the 1960s, anthropologists began to view material culture within the framework of cultural ecology, focusing primarily on the relationships between technology, subsistence, and environment. Very little attention was given to body decoration and personal adornment, which were likely viewed as whimsical distractions from the more serious challenges offered by researchers like Murdock, Steward, White, and Service. The introduction of sociobiology by E.O. Wilson in the 1970s had a similar effect, and as a result, many decades passed without serious attention being paid by anthropologists to self-decoration and adornment.

One notable exception to this trend was Wobst’s (1977) *Stylistic Behavior and Information Exchange*, which interpreted various styles of Yugoslavian folk dress as communicating important social messages to different groups of observers. Wobst, an archaeologist, was dissatisfied with the “confining theoretical perspectives of traditional stylistic analysis” which he characterized as “a boring routine which rests on shaky ground” (1977:317). He argued that while changes in style had been primarily used by archaeologists to “identify temporal and spatial socio-cultural discontinuities” or to identify “homeostasis in communication processes within a social unit,” the role of style in information exchange had been completely underappreciated (Wobst 1977:318-19). In his study, Wobst effectively illustrated that style was dynamic, multidimensional, and able to
communicate messages about group affiliation over broad geographic regions, while at the same time defining one’s wealth, status, or social position within groups. Operating along similar lines, Heider (1969) and Schwarz (1979) also called for a return to the anthropology of body decoration and adornment, especially in relation to clothing or dress, due to its efficacy in communicating social information.

The anthropology of personal adornment has experienced a revival over the past few decades, particularly where dress and fashion are concerned. Anthropologists and archaeologists interested in the more symbolic aspects of behavior and material culture began to re-focus on art in many human cultures, past and present. Post-structuralist perspectives have reframed the discussion in terms of agency, practice, and performance, focusing on the role of clothing in constructing identity (Hansen 2004). These approaches are united by a preoccupation with the manner in which dress is affected by colonialism and globalization, but otherwise have reached little consensus. One general point of agreement is that regardless of where you look, dress is always “dynamic and changing” and people everywhere are concerned with keeping up to date with the latest trends and styles (Hansen 2004:387). In this regard, costly signaling theory is particularly adept at explaining why fashion must be constantly reinvented and pushed to new levels.

2.4 Evolutionary Aesthetics

Boas characterized humans as having a “craving to produce things that are felt as satisfying through their form” (Boas 1927 [1955]:9); likewise, Ember and Ember (2011:290) discussed “satisfying aesthetic needs” as a function of personal adornment. These comments suggest that art production may be an evolved human propensity, and the fact that self-decoration and art production are cultural universals appears to confirm it. As
such, it follows that creativity and art production evolved to solve some problem associated with survival and/or reproduction. This is exactly the line of reasoning presented by Geoffrey Miller in *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Selection Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (2000). Miller argues that artistic elaboration functions as a costly signal of individual creativity, intelligence, and skill, in what he terms "aesthetic fitness" (Miller 1999; Miller 2000; Miller 2001). This aesthetic fitness is viewed as a type of mate choice criteria which evolved through sexual selection during the course of human evolution. Closely following Miller's ideas, Steven Mithen views the ability to produce quality hand-axes during the Pliocene as a costly fitness signal which, through the process of sexual selection, shaped the cognitive architecture of the human brain, as well as instilling in our species the underpinnings of creativity and artistic expression (Kohn and Mithen 1999; Mithen 2003; Mithen 1996).

Denis Dutton (2009) draws heavily on the ideas of Miller and Mithen, as well as Darwin, Veblen, and Zahavi, in his explanation of the human "art instinct" as a costly signal which was sexually selected for throughout human evolution and prehistory. In *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (2009), Dutton criticizes anthropologists for failing to address art as an important human universal due to the "reigning orthodoxy" of cultural relativism and a "denial of human psychological nature" (Dutton 2009:64-65). He argues that given the evident universality of art and personal adornment, "no curious Darwinian ought to ignore it" (Dutton 2009:100). Assuaging fears that costly signaling explanations of art and adornment will be an affront to some, Dutton sensibly points out, "The very idea that costliness and art are intrinsically connected in our aesthetic psychology may be a disagreeable possibility, but if it turns out to be true, it is a
fact that is better faced than buried” (Dutton 2009:156).

Voland (2003) argues that the costly signaling of hidden qualities through the production and display of aesthetic artifacts has, over time, shaped human aesthetic preferences, instilling in our species a psychological preference for beauty which aids survival and reproduction. Voland (2003:242) asks the question, “Is something beautiful because it is costly and because, in a social and competitive world, it is useful to develop preferences for persons who can afford lavish expenditure?” He elaborates on this point.

Beauty communicates the sociobiological qualities of those who have invested in the production of beauty. Here we are dealing with a triad of messages, which at first glance appear to have little to do with each other. The “I am fit” comes from sexuality, the “I am strong” comes from the competitions for power, and the “I am good” from morality. What these messages have in common is that their core information is not so obviously recognizable. “Good genes” cannot be seen… all three messages require proof of their substance and provide costly signals- which alone due to their mere existence document hidden qualities of the signaler (Voland 2003:257).

The common thread uniting many of these explanations is that they view artistic elaboration and personal adornment as costly signals of fitness that have been sexually selected as a result of competition for quality mates. Dissanayake (2007) disagrees with this view of art as competition and provides a contrasting explanation: that the arts "enhance cooperation and social cohesion and continuity" (2007:6). Dissanayake ties artistic elaboration or "artification" as she terms it, to religious behavior, and asserts that its function is "relieving tension and anxiety and instilling a sense of coping with uncertainty by making individuals feel part of a group and even connected to a higher power" (Dissanayake 2007:10). This explanation views artistic elaboration as a survival advantage operated upon by natural selection, as opposed to a fitness indicator operated upon by sexual selection; however, these two explanations need not be mutually exclusive.
It is important to understand the relationship between costly signaling, sexual selection, and reproductive success. As Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) point out, sexual selection is not an inherent component of all signaling contexts, and, as we point out numerous times, signaling is not just about males attempting to impress potential mating partners with honest signals of hidden genetic quality. Rather, signaling games can involve women signaling the ability to invest time and effort in the cooking of elaborate feasting dishes as part of a collective signal of lineage quality or men sending honest signals of coalition commitment to potential supporters. Such signals are not necessarily designed to acquire immediate reproductive advantages but do function as a way to acquire social, symbolic, or material benefits (2005:244).

Bliege Bird and Smith go on to discuss the evolutionary advantages of costly signaling in terms of ultimate causes (reproductive benefits) and proximate causes (power, wealth), and point out that "within limits, people prefer more status to less, wealth to poverty, and so on" (Bliege Bird and Smith 2005: 244). This explains how artistic elaboration could have originated as a fitness signal to attract mates and, over time, transitioned into a signal of status, wealth, or prestige. Voland (2003:256) also discusses this possibility, saying that regardless of how aesthetic preferences originally evolved, over time these preferences “have been exploited by numerous social processes and undergone signal evolution; they began to play a new and significant role” in human societies.

2.5 Costly Signaling Explanations of Art and Adornment

Economist Thorstein Veblen’s (1899 [1994]) *The Theory of the Leisure Class* has an entire chapter dedicated to the importance of dress and personal adornment in signaling wealth and status. The consumption and display of fashionable clothing and luxury goods by Victorian era elites was, according to Veblen, explained by the singular ability of these items to convey an enormous amount of social information in large residentially and economically mobile societies, in which it was difficult to gauge the wealth of one's peers.
Under these conditions, costly and wasteful artistic elaboration and personal adornment represent an important social arena in which elites have the opportunity to signal their wealth and power in an effort to compete for prestige, status, allies, and quality mates. According to Veblen, there are three specific principles of dress that cause it to be identified as conspicuous waste. Dress must be conspicuously expensive, particularly inconvenient, and completely up to date (Veblen 1994 [1899]). Expense, predictably, signals wealth, but so too does inconvenience: the top hats, corsets, and fine linens which characterized Victorian fashion assured that the wearer “cannot when so attired bear a hand in any employment that is directly and immediately of any human use” (Veblen 1994 [1899]:171). Inconvenience, in Victorian society, was “the insignia of leisure” and expensive and rapidly changing fashions assured the honesty of this insignia (Veblen 1994 [1899]:171). Veblen believed that dress and personal appearance were the single most effective means of communicating one’s social standing and that “our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance” (Veblen 1994 [1899]:167). The ability to attain with one glance all one needs to know about a social adversary’s position is key to the costly signaling model of body decoration and personal adornment.

Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) credit much of the development of costly signaling theory to Veblen’s idea of conspicuous consumption. They also advocate for the application of costly signaling theory in formulating explanations of artistic elaboration and personal adornment. This should not be a difficult task, considering that decoration, dress, and adornment have typically been explained by anthropologists in terms of communicating social messages and serving as status markers. Bliege Bird and Smith
discuss two studies that demonstrate “the broad applicability of signaling theory to the arts and aesthetic design” (2005:231). The first details Bowser’s (2000) study of Achuar-Quichua chicha bowls, through which women signal their artistic skill, as well as their political alliances. By achieving excellence in pottery, women could attract better marital opportunities and once married, could continue to strengthen and expand their political alliances. Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) also discuss Weissner’s (1984) study of beaded headbands among the San, which found that signaling artistic skill and effort to potential mates and allies was an important means for individuals, primarily women, in this egalitarian society to distinguish themselves from others.

Sosis, Kress, and Boster (2007) published a costly signaling explanation of ritual scarification, presenting a number of hypotheses regarding the relationship between costly male rites and demography and kinship, resource acquisition and sharing, warfare, and mating. After testing the predicted relationships against eHRAF data, their only significant correlation was that males in societies that engage in warfare are subject to the costliest rites. Furthermore, men in societies that engage in external warfare are more likely endure rites that leave permanent visible scars, while men in societies engaging in internal warfare do not typically bear visible ritual scars. Sosis et al. (2007) explain that societies practicing internal warfare do not benefit from permanent group markers, because individuals may need to switch allegiances at some point; however, in societies engaging in external warfare, ritual scars signal commitment to the group and promote solidarity among males. Ultimately, costly scarification rites could be designed to deal with free-riding during warfare, a serious collective action problem (Sosis et al. 2007).

Ember and Ember (2011) describe a similar effect, noting that the type of body
adornment popular within a society may reflect its politics. Tattooing is prevalent in
societies with inherited social stratification because of its permanence; in addition, certain
designs are usually restricted to high status individuals. Societies characterized by less
permanent leadership and more fluid social organization are more likely to decorate with
paint, which is temporary (Ember and Ember 2011).

Roscoe’s (2009) study of costly signaling as alliance building in contact-era New
Guinea demonstrates how body decoration and personal adornment can signal important
social messages in a social arena he terms conspicuous performance. These performances
were held during pig-killing festivals and rites of passage when many different groups
were gathered together, and consisted of “elaborately choreographed exhibitions of singing,
dancing, and music mounted by spectacularly decorated performers” (Roscoe 2009:96). It
was expected that each man would be lavishly dressed, reflecting not only his own wealth,
but also the wealth of his clan. The ability of groups of men to sing in unison and stage
impressive performances signaled that they were able to cooperate effectively as military
units. In addition, the aesthetic use of spears, masks, predatory iconography, and
otherworldly sounds may have served to intimidate and frighten the audience, once again
displaying the military effectiveness of male groups.

These diverse studies dealing with art production, personal adornment, and body
modification illustrate the potential that costly signaling theory has for explaining a
uniquely human behavior, self-decoration, as an activity that serves a number of purposes:
it has been shown to indicate social differentiation, mark group affiliation, enhance and
display cooperation, and prevent free-riding during warfare. The thorough examination of
nineteenth century Lakota self-decoration detailed in chapter three below will shed further
light on this process, illustrating many additional individual and group benefits gained through this costly signaling phenomenon.

2.6 Personal Adornment in Lakota Society

Within the last few decades, some researchers have begun to attempt to explain body art and personal adornment among the Lakota. Bol (1985) discussed Lakota artistic elaboration and adornment as a means for men to display evidence of their brave exploits and generosity, while for women it was an opportunity to display skill and industriousness, as well as a way to confirm and maintain kinship ties. For both sexes, dress was important in establishing esteem and prestige (Bol 1985). Bol argues that Lakota art, as a culturally sanctioned phenomenon, became critically important during the early-reservation period in “supporting and conserving the traditional value system in the face of threatened disruption” (Bol 1985:50). According to Bol, early reservation era Lakota women used personal adornment and the production of art as a means to resist cultural change.

Schneider (1983) discusses a few inaccurate, but commonly held ideas involving Lakota women and the production of arts and crafts. The prevalent belief that women in Plains tribes “were drudges, no better than slaves, who worked night and day to provide for their family’s needs” is challenged, as is the notion that women were somehow not involved in the production of important religious or ceremonial objects (Schneider 1983:102). The study concludes that women, as a result of their role in craftwork, received wealth, prestige, and supernatural power for themselves and their families, occasionally earning public recognition.

DeMallie discusses personal adornment and art in his re-examination of sex roles in traditional Lakota societies “from the perspective of the cultural symbols that defined
masculinity and femininity” (1983:237). He, like Bol and Schneider, concludes that art and adornment are critical in delineating gender roles and enforcing behavioral ideals within Lakota societies; however, his focus on how these roles and ideals were communicated using symbols is important. A post-structuralist study looking at the relationship between Lakota art and social organization conducted by Gombert (1994) also discusses the role of symbolism in communicating social information. “Art production by males reinforces masculine behavioral ideals by advertising male accomplishment” and “art production by females advertises feminine virtues- chastity, fecundity, industry, and generosity” (Gombert 1994:112). There appears to be a consensus that artistic elaboration and personal adornment, in Lakota societies, advertised important social information regarding gender roles, social status, behavioral ideals, and personal achievements.

2.7 Summary

The research reviewed here has revealed some informative and exciting new areas of inquiry, but also a few significant gaps in the literature pertaining to inter-disciplinary approaches to art, body decoration, and personal adornment. The discussion of costly signaling theory described how recent research has begun to address seemingly irrational or wasteful individual or group expenditures of time and energy, reframing these behaviors as adaptive due to their ability to advertise hidden qualities, garner prestige, or promote cooperation. Self-decoration and personal adornment were suggested to be particularly conducive to costly signaling explanations, but very little research has followed up on this recommendation.

A brief look at the history of anthropological inquiry into art production and self-decoration revealed the lack of any sort of systematic, empirical, and comparative
approach; instead, research into art and adornment has lacked a theoretical base to guide analysis. Discussions of art are often an afterthought, relegated to the final chapters of textbooks and ethnographies, and are rarely the primary focus of research (Coote and Shelton 1992). While there is little agreement on the function of art in small-scale societies, what exactly it does or what purpose it serves, there is broad agreement that it is a culturally-determined medium of communication. Personal adornment is typically viewed as a means to delineate social position, rank, age, gender, occupation, ethnic identity, or ritual participation and religious affiliation (Ember and Ember 2011).

An exciting new area of research, evolutionary aesthetics, has begun to uncover the evolutionary roots of creativity, including self-decoration, art production, and storytelling. According to Miller (2000; 2001), artistic elaboration functions as a costly signal of creativity, intelligence, and skill which was sexually selected for throughout the course of human evolution; similar arguments have been made by Dutton (2009), Voland (2003), and Mithen (1996; 2003). If art originally evolved as a mate-selection criterion which experienced run-away selection, it may help to explain the Upper Paleolithic creativity explosion which occurred around 40,000 years ago. Regardless, it is generally agreed that the emergence of representational art and self-decoration had some sort of adaptive value, conferring a selective advantage on anatomically modern humans (White 2003). Costly signaling theory may provide an explanation for this seemingly sudden appearance of art and personal adornment, which coincided with the spread of early modern humans across the globe (Kuhn and Stiner 2007).

Recent publications in each of these three areas underline the need for an empirical and theoretically-guided refocusing on art, personal adornment, and self-decoration. Many
studies stress costly signaling theory specifically, and evolutionary perspectives broadly, as potentially productive lines of inquiry which can begin to clarify how art and adornment function in small-scale societies. Ethnographic studies will be particularly helpful in meeting this goal, as they are capable of providing empirical evidence indicating that self-decoration affects, and is affected by, social negotiations, enhancing individual and group success. Until these sorts of hypotheses are tested against ethnographic data, as noted by Bliege Bird and Smith (2005:225), they remain only “plausibility arguments.” Ultimately, it will be necessary to illustrate, in specific cultural contexts, the costs involved in social signaling, the hidden qualities that are advertised, the social mechanisms by which the integrity of costly signals are maintained, and the benefits conferred on the signaler, the receiver, and the group in question. The Lakota ethnographic and ethnohistoric data detailed below will contribute to achieving these goals.
Chapter 3

Ethnohistoric Data

The Lakota tribes dwelling on the northern plains of North America are often thought of as the quintessential Native American group (Albers 1983; Hassrick 1964), but in actuality their lifestyle was a short lived phenomenon lasting barely more than one hundred years. Beginning around 1775 with the mastery of equestrianism and ending around 1875 with forced settlement on reservations, the iconic culture of the Lakota, as we have come to know it, was made possible only by a very specific combination of historical, social, economic, and political factors. In order to understand how costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment by Lakota individuals and groups operated, it is first necessary to examine the particular conditions that caused this phenomenon to emerge.

3.1 Lakota Ethnohistory

The Lakota, also known as the Teton or Western Dakota, are the largest and westernmost group of what have been historically referred to as the Sioux. In actuality, the Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota people represent three distinct but loosely related nations speaking different dialects of a common language (Powers 1975). The three groups were mistakenly dubbed “Sioux” by Revolutionary War era French fur-traders who mispronounced nadowe-ssi-wag, an Algonquian word meaning snakelike ones or enemies (Lazarus 1991; Powers 1975). The Lakota (prairie dwellers, also referred to as Teton), at the point of confinement to reservations in the 1870s, were divided into seven tribes: Oglala (they scatter their own), Sicangu (burnt thigh, also referred to as Brule), Hunkpapa (end of the circle), Mniconjou (planters beside the stream), Itazipco (without bows, also referred to as Sans Arc), Oohenunpa (two kettles), and Sihasapa (blackfeet). The Dakota
(Santee) are the easternmost of the "Sioux". In the late 1800s, when confined to reservations, they consisted of four tribes: Sisseton (fish scale dwellers), Wahpeton (leaf dwellers), Wahpekute (leaf shooters), and Mdewakantonwan (spirit lake dwellers). The Nakota lived between these two larger groups and were divided into two tribes: the Yankton (end dwellers) and the Yanktonai (little end dwellers). Before 1700, these loosely related Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota groups occupied the western Great Lakes region subsisting on wild rice, fishing, and small-game hunting, supplemented by slash and burn horticulture (Powers 1975).

Initial contact with the Woodland Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota groups by European explorers, missionaries, and traders occurred as early as 1640. At this time the combined population of the three groups is estimated to have been around 28,000 (Bray 1994). During this period, group boundaries were flexible with populations being continually redistributed as a result of migrations, economic pressures, and warfare with the Central Algonquians (Powers 1975).

In the years between 1695 and 1700, four Lakota groups crossed the Mississippi River in Minnesota and moved west onto the Plains, marking an important transition in Lakota history (Bray 1994). A number of different factors made this migration possible. Up until the late 1600s, the Sioux were blocked from expansion by the Chippewa and Cree to the east and north and by Plains horticulturalists to the west. Contact with European explorers and traders, however, had a catastrophic effect on the horticultural villages of the Omaha, Ponca, and Iowa. From 1680 to 1750 the spread of epidemics had seriously depopulated these sedentary villages, opening the door for Lakota expansion (Bray 1994).

Lakota bands advanced westward onto the prairie through a combination of military
aggression and diplomacy. According to Bray (1994:177), the general pattern involved “joint land-use truces contracted between individual villages and Sioux bands, characterized by trade, intermarriage, and occasionally temporary residence of whole bands at village locations.” Once these truces broke down, military force was used to seize the territories in question. In some cases entire village populations were absorbed into Lakota bands; one arrangement such as this between a Sicangu (Brule) band and a Ponca village led to the emergence of the Wazhazha band of the Sicangu tribe (Bray 1994).

At some point around 1750, the Lakota obtained horses from the Arikara and soon after adopted a nomadic equestrian lifestyle (Powers 1975). They quickly began building herds of horses, a recent arrival to the northern Plains, through raiding western tribes which had acquired horses along the ancient Rocky Mountain trade network (Hämäläinen 2003; Powers 1975). Within the space of a few generations the Lakota completely transitioned from a Woodland subsistence economy to a Plains equestrian bison hunting economy. By 1785, the Lakota had secured the Missouri River drainage, a huge territory spanning from the Mississippi River in Minnesota to the Black Hills of South Dakota, which they defended and continually expanded north, west, and south (Lazarus 1991).

The shift to a nomadic equestrian subsistence economy had a transformative effect on Lakota social organization and culture. It greatly increased mobility, allowing the Lakota to mostly avoid the waves of epidemics that began to decimate the horticultural village populations of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara in the late eighteenth century. As in the first half of the eighteenth century further south, Lakota bands took advantage of the depopulation of these northern Missouri River villages by negotiating new joint land-use truces, establishing hunting rights to the trans-Missouri high plains (Bray 1994).
Equestrianism also dramatically increased hunting efficiency, leading to a much higher standard of living and causing a population boom. Between 1785 and 1825, while Plains village tribal populations were greatly decreased due to epidemics, the Lakota expanded by 25 percent. This unprecedented growth, in turn, caused the many scattered Lakota bands to begin the transition to tribal social organization. According to Bray (1994:177), “greater subsistence security encouraged the regular aggregation of larger groups.” Bison hunting on horseback differed greatly from hunting on foot; it was now a cooperative endeavor, requiring as many mounted hunters as possible. As a result, over the course of a few decades, the gathering of Lakota bands for the annual summer hunt led to a “seasonal coalescing of tribes” (Bray 1994:177).

The effect of the equestrian adaptation on Lakota military capacity was also transformative. As early as 1700, French fur traders described the Lakota/Dakota/Nakota as "formidable warriors" who, when not "fighting their enemies the Central Algonquians, were fighting each other" (Powers 1975:16). While new to the Plains and traveling on foot with their travois dogs, the Lakota had managed to seize a great deal of territory from village horticulturalists through aggressive military action. Even before they attained horses, this is evidence that the Lakota were particularly adept at warfare; once mounted, Lakota warriors were a force to be reckoned with. This point is well illustrated by the relationship between the Lakota and the Arikara toward the end of the eighteenth century. Once a fierce tribe numbering over 20,000 people, the Arikaras had adopted equestrianism much sooner than the Lakota, and for decades had blocked the Oglala from pushing west; unfortunately, the Arikara then experienced depopulation due to a smallpox epidemic (Powers 1975). Bray describes the aftermath:
The Arikaras were reduced to two faction-torn villages effectively dominated by the Sioux. At harvest time Arikaras were forced to trade surplus crops at rates set by Teton visitors, whose camps prevented Arikara access to buffalo. When the Arikaras won a key position in the expanding St. Louis-based fur trade, Teton bands united to drive them onto the prairies, forcing Arikara relocation above the Grand River (Bray 1994:177).

This Lakota tactic of forced trade in exchange for hunting access was used against village horticulturalists well into the nineteenth century.

Moving onto the Plains and adopting an equestrian lifestyle required a complete transformation of the Lakota belief system and ceremonial life; here the influence of Plains village cultures is notable. The Sundance was innovated around 1785 by Miniconjou and Saone tribes in the north, likely due to their contact with the Mandan, whose Okeepa ceremony was very similar (Bray 1994). Many of the Lakota akicita, headmen's, and war societies were taken, in whole, from Plains village horticulturalists, or greatly influenced by them (Wissler 1912). Adjusting to a nomadic life on the Plains also required new creation stories, myths, and folklore reflecting Plains motifs. The Lakota creation stories describing the emergence of the people at Wind Cave in the Black Hills and the White Buffalo Calf Woman legend are examples of the transition from a Woodland-oriented cosmology to a Plains-oriented cosmology that occurred during the eighteenth century (Powers 1975).

By 1800, after only one hundred years on the Plains, the loosely organized bands of the Lakota had formed into seven distinct tribes, each subdivided into a number of bands. They jointly controlled a huge territory covering portions of Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, Nebraska, and almost all of South Dakota, and were poised to expand their territory further north into Canada, west into Wyoming and Montana, and south into the rich hunting territory below the Platte River (Lazarus 1991). The Lakota had established
direct relationships with fur-traders, no longer having to go through Nakota, Dakota, or Plains village middle-men to access valuable trade goods (Bray 1994). The Lakota had adjusted their belief system and had borrowed or innovated new ceremonies better suited to the needs of their highly mobile lifestyle (Powers 1975). They were growing by 25 percent and accelerating, and Lakota tribes and bands were rapidly adjusting their leadership structures in order to accommodate the inevitable tension caused by larger residential groups. It was during this prosperous period of growth and expansion that inter-band and intertribal competition began in earnest, causing the emergence of a complex and intricate system of heraldic display of war honors. This display of war honors by men was just one aspect of a society-wide phenomenon involving the costly signaling of hidden attributes through personal adornment and body art.

3.2 Lakota Social Organization

Lakota social organization was fluid in terms of group membership, but at the same time maintained a great deal of cohesion due to a nested leadership structure and the enforcement of order by akicita societies, which acted as a sort of police force. This allowed for a flexible seasonal residential pattern. Throughout much of the year, Lakota tribes and bands dispersed into small sub-bands called tiyospaye, which consisted of a few of interrelated kin-groups, perhaps 50-100 people. During the winter months and at various times throughout the year, these tiyospaye would aggregate into bands (300-500 people), camping together, hunting, and trading. Occasionally, all of the bands which made up each individual Lakota tribe would form a formal camp, and it was at these larger gatherings where tribal leaders were elected and decisions were made. These tribal gatherings, at which a few thousand people were camped together, also allowed for
ceremonies to be conducted and marriages to be arranged. Strict exogamous marriage rules dictated that individuals from the same sub-band or band could not marry, but spouses could be chosen from other bands of one’s tribe, as long as there was no evidence of being related; however, it was preferred that marriage partners be sought from a different Lakota tribe (Hasrick 1964; Powers 1975). This typically happened during the extremely large annual summer encampment, ideally attended by all seven tribes, at which many thousands of Lakota were present. It was at this annual gathering of the tribes that the Sundance was celebrated, rites of passage ceremonies and give-aways were conducted, and the majority of marriages were arranged (Hassrick 1964). Marriage, rites of passage, and ceremonies will be addressed further below.

At the annual Sundance encampment, camping spots were delegated based on the prestige and power of each tribe present. The enormous crescent-shaped camp had an opening to the east, and the two areas nearest the opening were referred to as the “horns” of the camp (Walker 1982:22). Opposite the opening, on the west side of the circle, was the most prestigious camp site: this was called the “chief place” (Walker 1982:23). The most wealthy and powerful tribe, the tribe with the most horses, skilled warriors, and prestigious headmen, was given the honor of camping at the chief place. The next two most powerful tribes were allowed to camp at the horns. In this manner, every year, all seven Lakota tribes vied for these prestigious camp sites and were made aware of their social position relative to the other tribes. Likewise, when the seven bands that made up each tribe gathered for formal encampments at various times throughout the year, this same system was followed; again, each band was made very much aware of their social position relative to other bands in their tribe.
At the conclusion of large tribal gatherings, family groups were free to leave with other bands or tribes to whom they were related, and in this manner group membership was constantly shifting. The Lakota traced descent bi-laterally, and due to the preference for intertribal marriages it was common to have close kin relationships with members of other bands and tribes. Post-marital residence rules were also very flexible, and a newly married couple could choose to set up their new tipi near either the wife’s or husband’s family. Typically, sons belonged to their father’s band and daughters belonged to their mother’s band, but freedom of choice was always allowed (Hassrick 1964).

3.3 Oglala Leadership Structure

In order to more clearly illustrate the nested leadership structure of Lakota bands and tribes, as well as how military success was instrumental in determining which individuals were nominated for leadership positions, it will be helpful to gain a general understanding of how government was structured for a specific tribe. The following description of tribal government, including a description of the annual elections of warrior societies, pertains to the Oglala tribe of the Lakota nation. Unless otherwise indicated, all data has been taken from Clark Wissler's richly detailed ethnographic report, *Societies and Ceremonial Associations in the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota* (1912).

The Oglala tribe experienced phenomenal growth during the nineteenth century. In 76 years their population grew from about 1,000 group members to over 4,500, expanding by 385 percent (Bray 1994). By the late historic period, the Oglala tribe was divided into seven bands: Payaba (head of the circle), Tapisleca (spleen), Kiyuska (breakers of the rule), Wajaje (class, kind), Itesica (bad faces), Oyupe (to throw down), and Wagluhe (loafers) (Powers 1975). These seven bands were made up of many tiyospaye (sub-bands) that were
typically named after their leader (Wissler 1912). At times the sub-bands would break into even smaller residential units generically termed *wicoti* (literally, to dwell), typically consisting of several interrelated families or *tiwahe*. The *tiwahe* was the smallest residential unit in Lakota society, made up of a few tipi inhabited by a man, his wives or wife, their children, and elderly parents. According to Powers (1975:35), "an Oglala belonged to the same *tiyospaye* from birth to death but could change his residence from one *wicoti* to the next as he desired. He regarded everyone in his *tiyospaye* and *wicoti* as kin, and was required to seek a spouse outside these bounded units." As mentioned, the Oglala, like all Lakota, were strictly exogamous; the *Kiyuska*, breakers of the rule, were designated such for violating marriage rules (Powers 1975).

Each of the seven Oglala bands had its own government and camp circle, and dwelled independently for much of the year. A band leader was called a *Wicasa*, and was generally selected from the ranks of a headmen's society (Hassrick 1964). The band leaders were not recognized by any specific regalia, but instead wore the garb representing the headmen's society to which they belonged. The Oglala had four headmen's societies: the Chiefs society, *Ska Yuha*, *Miwatani*, and the Omaha. The specific regalia associated with each of these societies will be detailed in section 3.5.

These seven *Wicasa*, together with the Chiefs society, were vested with the responsibility of selecting the *Wicasayatanpi* (praiseworthy men) or shirt wearers, who were by far the most prestigious males in the tribe. Wissler (1912:39) calls shirt men "the four grand councilors of the Oglala." Their "badge of office" was a fabulous painted shirt known as a hair shirt, or scalp shirt, which indicated to all who saw it that its wearer essentially "controlled the camp" (Powers 1975:40). Shirt men were elected for life, and
were considered "the real power in the government" (Wissler 1912:7). Figures 3.1 and 3.2 below are two Lakota hair shirts held in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 3.1. Man’s Hair Shirt, Itazipco Lakota, circa 1870. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (1/3920). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Figure 3.2. Man’s Hair Shirt, Lakota, circa 1875. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (9446). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Even more prestigious than the four shirt men representing each Lakota tribe, however, were the four *Wicasayatanpika*, who were the “four great leaders of the nation” (Hassrick 1964). These four men were selected from the 28 shirt wearers of the Lakota tribes, and during the gathering of the tribes for the annual Sundance, “formulated national policy and formally approved or disapproved actions taken by the headmen of the separate divisions…their was a position of unparalleled honor. Their opinion was paramount, their prestige unsurpassed, their reputation unimpeachable” (Hassrick 1964:7). These men, in addition to a hair shirt, also wore elaborately decorated leggings adorned with a fringe of human hair. Wissler gives an excellent description of the hair shirt and other regalia which identified shirt men.

Though in recent times this garment was worn by anyone, it was originally the exclusive regalia of these four men. We are told that the true scalp shirt was made of mountain sheepskin. Two full skins were used. The dewclaws were not removed, the skin from the forelegs forming the sleeves, that from the hind legs hung down at the sides. Across the shoulders and down the sleeves were quill-worked bands. Two shirts were painted blue on the upper half and yellow on the lower; the other two had red and yellow halves respectively. The most distinguishing feature, however, was the hairlock fringe on the sleeve. In theory, at least, a lock of hair was added for each recognized deed in war: coup, capturing a horse, taking prisoners, getting wounded, saving the life of a friend, etc., but eventually the fringed shirt became simply the conventional regalia of the four grand councilors and finally a style of dress for anyone. These shirts owners wore a single eagle feather, horizontally on the back of the head. They had no distinctive painting for the face and body (Wissler 1912:39).

Crazy Horse and Man Afraid of his Horse were prominent Oglala shirt wearers in the late nineteenth century.

The four shirt men, along with the seven band headmen and the Chiefs society, were charged with the annual selection of four *wakicun* (officers) who were responsible for organizing and controlling the tribe’s summer camp. Wissler’s (1912:8) description of
how the election of the four wakicun was announced to the tribe is fascinating, illustrating a very careful attention to symbolism, as well as the public nature of such matters among the Lakota.

A stick is prepared to recognize the candidate's achievements. Thus, if he has been a victorious Blotahunka [a war society], a striped stick is used; if wounded in battle, a red stick; if he killed an enemy, a black stick. The akicita go to his wife's tipi and thrust the stick into the ground. The woman prepares food and sends it with the stick to the executive tipi. If her husband has been re-elected, he is already there, but, if newly elected, he hunts up a fine pouch, a pipe, a generous supply of tobacco and takes his place in the tent.

The first order of business for the four newly-elected wakicun was to choose two head akicita (soldiers), and these two head akicita in turn chose two other head akicita to serve with them. Once chosen, the four head akicita were assembled and two black stripes were painted on their faces. A war bonnet was given each head akicita, as well as a special club and a herald to make announcements for them. According to Wissler (1912), appointment to this service was regarded as an honor. The four head akicita then selected a number of other men, or more typically an akicita society, to serve as a sort of police force; it is this society or group of men who maintained order in the large encampment, as well as when moving the camp. The akicita also oversaw the buffalo hunt, making sure that no one spooked or divided the herd, and that all hunters could charge at once. Wissler noted that the headmen and shirt wearers typically chose the akicita by rotation, although they were not obliged to. The head akicita and akicita society chosen served until camp broke for the year, and new elections were held every spring.

Membership in an akicita society was an absolute requirement for any Lakota man who aspired to become a man of status, prestige, and power. It was through akicita membership that men engaged in social-networking, were given the opportunity to join
war parties, demonstrated military prowess, and advertised prestige and success. *Akicita* societies will be discussed at length in section 3.5.

### 3.4 Signaling of Military Prowess by Lakota Men

Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Lakota continually expanded their territory through military aggression. After securing the rich hunting area of the Upper Missouri drainage, much less time and effort needed to be allocated to hunting; in exchange, the Lakota were engaged in constant intertribal warfare, having made enemies of nearly every other Plains tribe. According to Hassrick (1964:72), “Living in the center of the buffalo range, these hunters were so rich in spoils of the chase that they could afford the luxury of almost continual aggressive warfare and placed those accomplished in it in high esteem.” In order to visually identify men who had achieved success in warfare and horse raiding, an intricate system of symbolism was employed, referred to by Benedict (1931:20) as a “heraldic display of war counts.”

Luther Standing Bear (1931:84) describes how the Lakota "language of feathers" denoted military honors. The first warrior to touch, or count coup on, an enemy secured the right to wear an eagle feather pointing straight up at the back of the head. The second warrior to count coup on that same enemy wore an eagle feather sideways, pointing to the right, at the back of the head, while the third to count coup wore his feather pointing left. The fourth and last warrior counting coup on an enemy wore an eagle feather hanging downward from the back of the head. Warriors also painted a red stripe across the quill of these eagle feathers to represent being wounded in battle, and veteran warriors could have many such painted stripes (Standing Bear 1931). Coups could also be displayed by painting stripes on one's leggings, with red stripes representing being wounded (Hassrick
Standing Bear points out that displaying these war honors "must of course, be honest" and that "at large social gatherings and council meetings the warriors all wore their various decorations, and everyone knew what deeds of bravery each man had performed by looking at the decorations" (Standing Bear 1931:86). Hassrick (1964:96) also discusses how these signals of military prowess were kept honest, pointing out that "all coups must be witnessed and later sworn to." According to Hassrick (1964:96), the coup was the basis of the Lakota war honor system, because every warrior's reputation "depended on the number of points he could accumulate, and competition for them was intense."

In addition to the display of eagle feathers for counting coup, a number of other military honors were signaled through personal adornment. A special headpiece consisting of a tuft of eagle down with a dangling eagle feather worn on the side of the head signaled that the wearer had successfully fought his way out after being surrounded by the enemy (Standing Bear 1931). Notched feathers indicated that a warrior's horse had been injured, and a stripped black feather with the tip remaining signaled a scout who had successfully sighted the enemy (Hassrick 1964). Painting a red hand on one's clothing or horse indicated the killing of an enemy in hand-to-hand combat (Hassrick 1964). In addition, a man who had killed an enemy in battle signified this by painting his arms and legs red, while a man who had killed two enemies painted his entire upper body red (figure 3.3 and 3.4). A cross painted on one's clothing represented saving a friend in battle, and a double cross signified riding a friend to safety on the back of one's horse (Hassrick 1964). The red painted designs on the man’s leggings in figure 3.4 may be double crosses indicating riding a friend to safety on horseback.
Figure 3.3. War Insignia, No. 5. A Man Who Killed an Enemy, by Thunder Bear, 1912. Courtesy, History Colorado (Walker Collection, MSS #653, Scan #10027691)
Horse raiding was by far the most expedient path to wealth and status in Lakota society, as horses were valuable in intertribal trade and were also the currency with which brideprice was paid. As a result, military honors for horse raiding were also signaled by Lakota men. Horse hoof marks were painted on feathers, leggings, and horses, with each individual hoof mark painted to correspond to the color of the horse it represented. A man
who captured ten or more horses signaled his prowess by wearing a miniature rope and moccasin at his belt, while only the miniature rope was worn if fewer than ten horses were stolen (Hassrick 1964).

In addition to signaling military prowess through the display of coups, Lakota males also painted images of their feats of bravery and valor in warfare in scenes of representational art (Bol 1985). Whether painted on the exterior of his tipi, his interior tipi liner, his shield, or on his robe, these pictographic representations of battle scenes served to advertise each warrior’s individual military accomplishments (figures 3.5 and 3.6). According to Bol (1985:34), “In order for a brave man to receive recognition, his deeds needed to be proclaimed; as a result, an artistic support system developed to sustain this important social value.”

This recapitulation of his deeds was closely monitored for truthfulness and accuracy by his peers. When worn or displayed, the painted items thus established his reputation, acting essentially as institutionalized forms of publicity continuously on exhibition for public viewing (Bol 1985:34).

This was in stark contrast to women’s art, which instead consisted of geometric designs. Women’s signaling through body art and adornment will be addressed at length in section 3.8.

The intricacy of this symbolic language of heraldic display is explained by a few different factors. Because of the importance of warfare in holding and expanding territory, raiding for horses, and defending the group from attack, every able-bodied man in Lakota society was expected to be proficient in warfare (Hassrick 1964). A young man would be addressed by his boyhood name and would not be eligible to take a wife until he had in some way proven himself in battle (Standing Bear 1933). These marks of military distinction also became important when it came to being nominated for membership in an
Figure 3.5. Painted Bison Robe, circa 1870-1880, Chief Young Man Afraid of His Horses, Oglala Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (522). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.

*akicita* or headmen’s society, as well as selecting leaders at the band and tribal level.

While leadership was hereditary in certain bands and tribes, in most cases it was merit based and dependent upon proof of military prowess and continual displays of generosity. As Lakota populations grew rapidly and the annual gathering of the tribes became larger and larger, the ability to display military success through self-decoration would have become increasingly important in situations where it was impossible to recognize people on the basis of name or reputation.
Figure 3.6. Shield picturing battle exploits of Chief Hump, circa 1880-1890, Mniconjou Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (6/2195). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
3.5 Costly Signaling through Men’s Society Regalia

Men’s societies were an important component of Lakota society and the accumulation of status. According to Hassrick (1964:15-16), men’s societies were “devoted to maintaining the well-being of the community and fostering among their members the value of a high reputation.” There were three types of men’s societies: akicita or military societies, war societies, and headmen’s societies. Military societies were typically for younger, less experienced warriors, while war societies consisted of the most renowned, elite warriors. Membership in headmen’s societies was restricted to the highest status warriors, shamans, and band and tribal leaders. Each Lakota band and tribe had differing numbers of each of these societies, and many societies cross-cut band and tribal boundaries. “The Crow Owners might at one time be the most popular among the Oglalas, while among the Brules their membership and influence might be limited, and elsewhere the society might not exist at all” (Hassrick 1964:16).

The prestige of each society was directly related to the prestige of its members, and the accomplishments of each society’s members was most effectively advertised through dancing and feasting at large tribal encampments, where war honors and society regalia were displayed for all to see. Akicita and headmen’s societies were extremely competitive, always trying to out maneuver each other in attracting the most promising warriors, performing feats of bravery in warfare, or being chosen to police the annual gatherings.

The military societies provided a key element in the competitive nature of warfare because they usually made up their own war parties and tried to exceed the military accomplishments of rival societies. Everything else was also competitive, whether it involved groups vying to see who defended the camp best or who killed the most buffalo (McGinnis 1990:93).
Due to the competitive nature of men’s societies, young men from poorer families had difficulty gaining membership, as did men who did not excel at hunting and warfare; according to one informant, “Such men just live” (Hassrick 1964:17). Society membership was an integral part of establishing a man’s reputation.

Among the Oglala there were six akicita societies, and one of these six was further divided into a number of sub-societies; it is important to note that each of these akicita societies had their own particular regalia, symbolically-adorned weapons, face and body paint, ceremonial pipes, dances, songs, and particular habits. The regalia and body paint associated with each society would have been recognized by members of all Lakota tribes and by other Plains tribes as well. Each akicita society had a designated number of officers: pipe keepers, singers and drummers, and lance, whip, or rattle bearers. The Tokala (Kit Fox) society, for instance, had two leaders, two pipe keepers, four lance bearers, two whip bearers, two food bearers, one herald, eight singers (four men and four women), one drum keeper, and thirty to forty lay members (Wissler 1912). Many of these special akicita officers were signified by a specific accessory, weapon, or hairstyle and these were certainly displayed at band and tribal gatherings (figure 3.7). Some offices even required specific acts or feats of bravery and daring to be performed, and these prestigious roles were also signified by special elaborate regalia and ceremonial weapons.
All *akicita* society members, whether holding a special office or not, were expected to display their societal regalia when appropriate. Some *akicita* societies were more prestigious than others, but a man was free to belong to more than one society as long as each society's rules allowed it. Societies were not age-graded, but as a rule younger warriors joined *akicita* societies while older men joined warrior and headmen's societies.
Women were not invited to join except as singers, although certain women were sometimes allowed to help with the production of regalia. Female relatives of society members, in some cases, were allowed to wear or display regalia at dances and special events. It should be noted that headmen's societies and war societies operated much like *akicita* societies, and most of the above generalizations apply to all three types of societies.

As mentioned, each *akicita*, headmen's, and war society member typically displayed the specific regalia and adornment of the particular society to which they belonged. An example of this is provided by Wissler (1912:16), in his description of what a member of the *Tokala akicita* (Kit Fox) society wore.

The members wear a Kit Fox skin around the neck, the head before, the tail behind. To the nose part small bags of medicine are attached. The edges, feet, and ears may be worked in porcupine quills and hung with bells according to the tastes of the individual owners. They take jaw bones of the tokala [fox], paint them red or blue (the old native colors), fasten them on a strip of otterskin or some similar material, and wear the bones on the forehead. On the back of the head is fastened a bunch of crow tail-feathers sideways, and sticking up are two eagle feathers. All the members use this head regalia.

The four Kit Fox lance bearers were singled out for particularly dangerous duties. In warfare, they were required to take the lead in battle and never retreat. To turn down this honor was considered a public disgrace. Wissler (1912:15) describes how the Kit Fox lances were constructed and adorned.

There are two beaded lances and two plain lances. They each bear two eagle feathers and a piece of *tokala* skin tied on in two separate bunches. Crow, magpie, or large prairie chicken feathers with a lone one of eagle down are tied in the middle. The tip of the lance is of iron. We are informed that for some fifty years the custom has been to wrap the two plain lances with otterskin.

Some Kit Fox members chose to cut their hair into Mohawks and wear porcupine quillwork headbands with ornaments dangling around the face. The Kit Fox *akicita*
painted their faces yellow, with red over their mouths, and when dancing, the officers painted themselves yellow (Wissler 1912).

The Kangi Yuha (crow owners) was structured very much like the Kit Fox, with the addition of four extra officers: two rattle bearers and two crow skin bearers. The Kangi Yuha appointed two short crow-feather lance bearers who, upon being installed, were required to proceed to war at once. In battle they would stick their lances into the ground and stay at that place fighting until a fellow member pulled the lance out of the ground, freeing them. This sort of mission was extremely dangerous, yet nearly every akicita and war society had members who were willing to risk their lives in this way. According to Wissler, "should he return alive, and it is the duty of his brethren to save him if possible, he may, if especially deserving, be allowed to retire honorably" (1912:24). The short crow-feather lances were covered with otter skin, and had an eagle feather at one end and a spear at the other end. The spear end had the head and neck of a crow attached to it, and some owl feathers were attached near the eagle feather. The Kangi Yuha painted their bodies black and tied pieces of skunk skin to their elbows and ankles, and removed their leggings and robes before going into battle. They wrapped a piece of crow skin around their necks, and in their hair wore an eagle feather over the forehead, and three or four eagle feathers at the back of the head (Wissler 1912).

The most prestigious akicita society among the Oglala was the Cante Tinza (Brave Heart) society. Two of their officers were called bonnet braves, and like the crow-feather lance bearers, were required to stake themselves to the ground in battle until released. The two bonnet braves were given headdresses made of buffalo horns, decorated with strips of beadwork and quillwork in yellow. The Brave Hearts painted two black lines diagonally
across their faces (figure 3.8). When returning home after a successful battle, they celebrated by dancing with sticks to which the scalps of their enemy were attached. There were also sticks with the hands of victims attached to them. A pole in the center of the dance arena was painted with black stripes, and the sticks with the scalps and the sticks with the hands were fastened to the pole. For this dance, the Brave Hearts painted their bodies with black stripes and blackened their faces (Wissler 1912). This society appears to have been the parent organization of a number of other societies, each with its own particular regalia, paint, and customs. These were the Black Chins, the No-flight society, the Big Braves, and the No Breech Cloth Dancers.

Figure 3.8. War Insignia, No. 13. Lance Bearer of the Brave Hearts, by Thunder Bear, 1912. Courtesy, History Colorado (Walker Collection, MSS #653, Scan #10041451)
The Badgers was an *akicita* that the Sicangu appropriated from the Crow and passed along to the Oglala. The pipe keepers were the most prestigious officers in the group; curiously, Badgers were only allowed to smoke tobacco that came from the Pawnee. The Badgers had more freedom than members of most societies when it came to choosing dress and adornment, with some wearing otterskin collars and others wearing hairpipe breast pieces. They could paint their faces as they wished, as long as a fellow member committed to using the same design and colors. When dancing, members would be paired according to their face paint.

Three other closely related *akicita* societies were the *Ihoka*, the *Sotka Yuha* (plain lance owners), and the *Wic’iska*. The regalia displayed by the leader of the *Sotka Yuha* is pictured in figure 3.9, and the regalia displayed by the lance bearer of the *Sotka Yuha* society is pictured in figure 3.10. Some of these societies were borrowed from the Crow or some other northern tribe. In some cases societies were changed or new societies formed due to the dreams of shamans or the consensus of society members (Wissler 1912). As new societies formed, older societies may have gone out of favor. Societies often had members from many bands, and many *akicita* societies, headmen’s societies, and war societies appear were intertribal, as with the Badgers *akicita*, which was introduced to the Oglala by the Sicangu.

The Chiefs society was the most prestigious headmen’s society. It was also called the Big-bellies and the Society of Chiefs, and appears markedly similar to the Bull societies of other Plains tribes. Members wore headdresses made from the skin of buffalo heads with the horns still attached, which were painted red, blue, or white. Near the end of the
Figure 3.9. War Insignia, No. 14. Leader of the Sotka Society, by Thunder Bear, 1912. Courtesy, History Colorado (Walker Collection, MSS #653, Scan #10041452)
The buffalo headdress was replaced by the eagle feather war bonnet, which, in popular culture, has come to be associated with Lakota chiefs (figure 3.11). For dances, members painted their bodies and lances white. The Chiefs society was more of a feasting and dancing society than a war society, its middle-aged members having proven themselves in battle many times over. Men rarely earned "sufficient recognition" to be nominated for membership until they were in their thirties or forties (Wissler 1912:38). Wissler (1912) also points out that the Chiefs society was the oldest and highest ranking Oglala men's society.
Figure 3.11. Eagle Feather Headdress, circa 1880, Oglala Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (11/4619). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
In the 1870s, some men under the leadership of Red Cloud formed a sub-society of the Chiefs society called *Ska Yuha* (white horse owners), after the habit of members of the Chiefs society riding white horses. Red Cloud, despite his wealth, impressive war record, and position as a headman, was never able to gain admittance into the Chiefs society. According to Hassrick (1964:14), “Red Cloud, because of a modest family background, was never able to command the kind of reverence among the Sioux which someone from an important family might have received.” Frustrated, he eventually formed his own headmen’s society. Unlike the Chiefs society, however, the *Ska Yuha* did participate in warfare, becoming quite prestigious. Wissler mentions that the white horse owners "took up the entire ritual of the older organization" but provides no description of their regalia (Wissler 1912:41).

The *Miwatani* (Mandan) was also a headmen's society, and its members were also active in warfare. One of Wissler's informants called the *Miwatani*, Chiefs, and Omaha society members "gentlemen of culture or high class men" (1912:41). In order to join one of these societies, one must be invited, although friends and kin who were members could influence the selections (Wissler 1912). The *Miwatani* originated a peculiar custom involving the throwing away of wives. At ceremonial occasions a group member would throw a stick into the air, proclaiming that whoever got the stick could have his wife. According to Wissler's informant John Blunt Horn, "afterwards, he may mourn and feel regret, but he must not reveal his feelings else he will be ridiculed and can never become chief" (Wissler 1912:45). This practice was copied by other headmen's societies.

*Miwatani* members displayed their membership in the society by painting their bodies red with blue stripes around the wrist, elbows, and arms. Their faces were painted
with a blue stripe running from one cheek, across the forehead, to the other cheek. They wore owl feathers on top of their heads and a bone whistle around their necks. A red-painted buffalo robe was worn by members, in the center of which was a rectangle-shaped quillwork design. One side of the robe was folded back and decorated with otterskin. According to Wissler, "if a member had discarded any wives he fastened an owl (leg and foot) to the folded end for every wife discarded" (1912:47). Miwatani members also wore a heavily fringed and decorated shirt, made according to certain specifications, which was elaborately beaded in alternating black and white patterns. Leggings beaded with the same design were also worn. In addition to these items of regalia, members were required to have an eagle bone whistle and a deer hoof rattle.

The Miwatani had two important officers called sash wearers. These men were required to stake themselves to the ground in battle with a cord attached to a hole in the end of their sashes. Wissler's informant John Blunt Horn described how the idea of the sashes came to a man in a dream. In his dream, the man saw a strange man dressed in splendid regalia and wearing a sash on his right side, which was decorated with transverse stripes of quillwork with white plumes at the end. The man said, "Dress as you saw me. Then you shall overcome everything. Medicine in small bags should be tied in your hair and a pair of white plumes should hang from each temple. There should also be some bags of medicine hung from the quills of plumes at the sides of your sash. Then like the eagle you will overcome all enemies" (Wissler 1912:43). This quote indicates the cultural significance attached to elaborate clothing and regalia. Regalia was also costly: when new sash men were appointed, the retiring sash men were required to make new sets of regalia for them, for which the new sash men paid one horse each.
The Omaha headmen's society was borrowed from the Omaha, who may have in turn borrowed it from the Pawnee. One of the more elaborate ceremonies held by this society required constructing an actual earth lodge in which rites were performed and a feast was held (Wissler 1912). No information is given by Wissler regarding the regalia of the Omaha headmen's society.

War societies primarily consisted of groups of elite warriors. Members of a war society called the Dogs mutually agreed to never retreat in battle; according to Wissler, they "were regarded as well nigh invincible and became very famous" (1912:54). Members of the Dogs society were not allowed to eat dog meat, considered a ceremonial delicacy by the Lakota. They were additionally not allowed to eat any meat that had been boiled. The Dogs were recognized by their "coyote" war paint, consisting of a red band across the mouth and cheeks and vertical red marks down each eye. There were four officers called coyote skin bearers who painted their faces blue and were believed to have the power of conjuring storms and fog to conceal themselves from their enemies. Other war societies, each with their particular habits and regalia, were the Blotahunka and the Sotka Tanka (Wissler 1912).

Men’s society regalia, along with displays of coup feathers and representational art on robes, shields, and tipis, were extremely effective in advertising the brave exploits, military prowess, and status of Lakota men. At large encampments, it would have been possible to observe the regalia of an unknown Lakota warrior and ascertain a great deal of information regarding his war record; likewise, it would have been possible to gauge the military effectiveness of individual bands and tribes by observing their warriors in full regalia. Even in battle, enemy groups would have been able to assess the strength of a
Lakota war party based on these displays of personal adornment and body decoration. The costs and benefits of this system of communication of hidden attributes for individuals, bands, and tribes will be discussed in chapter four.

3.6 Indigenous and Euro-American Trade Goods as Costly Signals

In addition to signaling military prowess, it was essential for an aspiring Lakota man of prestige to accumulate, display, and redistribute large amounts of valuable and heavily-ornamented goods. The bulk of these items were produced by their Lakota wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters, and over the course of the nineteenth century this production increasingly relied on the tools, materials, and decorations attained through frequent contact with European fur-traders. The role of Lakota women in the costly signaling phenomenon was substantial and will be addressed at length below; but first, a brief review of Lakota involvement in the fur-trade.

The European fur-trade played a key role in the expansion and growth of Lakota tribes well before they reached the peak of their power in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Chippewa and Cree, who were well-armed owing to being supplied with guns by English and French traders since 1650, were largely responsible for pushing the Lakota west onto the prairie in the first half of the eighteenth century (Hanson 1975). They faced relatively little resistance to westward expansion, as the Plains villages were being continually weakened by epidemics spread to them by fur-traders and explorers (Bray 1994).

The Plains villages had been, for centuries before European contact, focal points for the flow of goods between many Native American groups from the east and west, who exchanged meat and hides for cultivated crops grown by the horticultural villagers. Raw
materials, especially different types of stone and ornamental goods including clay paints and decorative shells were often traded thousands of miles from their sources along these ancient networks. European fur-traders tapped into these prehistoric networks and by the mid-eighteenth century, a steady flow of guns and metal trade goods were being dispersed onto the Plains from the northeast, while horses and riding gear were flowing up from the southwest (Hanson 1975; Holder 1970).

Adopting a nomadic equestrian lifestyle greatly enhanced the mobility and wealth of the Lakota, which in turn intensified the flow and variety of European trade goods, but this was a gradual process which took decades to unfold. According to Hanson (1975), by the time Lewis and Clark visited the Lakota in 1804, the tribes already possessed a wide array of utilitarian trade goods including muskets, knives, hatchets, kettles, lead, brass wire, pistols, lances, awls, and iron for arrowheads. Guns, while available, were not widely sought after by the Lakota during this period. In 1805, explorer Zebulon Pike noted that among an estimated 11,000 Lakota, only a hundred owned guns, while among the Chippewa every male owned one (Pike 1966 as cited in Hanson 1975). A few ornamental items, including peace medals, bells, and pony beads were also available in limited supplies, but for the first few decades of the nineteenth century the Lakota traded primarily for necessities.

Hanson (1975:7) notes that among the Lakota, “articles of decoration and fancy metal goods were scarce before 1835.” There are few different explanations for this apparent lack of consumption of prestige trade goods. Up until 1840, European fashion trends had required an endless supply of beaver pelts; this resulted in over-hunting and European fur traders and trappers had to continually push westwards, eventually shifting
the hub of trading west to the Rocky Mountains and away from the Lakota. As newly successful equestrian bison hunters, Lakota tribes had little interest in trapping beavers and required few European trade goods beyond basic household items and metal tools. These could easily be attained by trading meat and deer or bison hides, usually at the intertribal trade fairs which were still very active up to the mid-nineteenth century (Holder 1970).

This scenario changed around 1835, when the Lakota were finally drawn into the European fur trade economy in earnest. Price spikes had encouraged a shift from beaver fur top hats, a staple of European and American fashion, to silk hats (Hanson 1975). At the same time that the beaver pelt market reduced in economic importance, a demand for buffalo robes suddenly materialized, desired primarily by settlers filtering in to the territory between the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers. Taking advantage of the opening of new markets, fur-traders refocused their efforts on the Great Plains. Hanson (1975:7) describes how this affected Lakota tribes.

The demand for buffalo hides from these settlers for carriage robes and coats brought a shift of the trading companies’ efforts to the plains. Buffalo robes, which the Tetons had had in excess since the acquisition of the horse, became prime currency. The Tetons were able to satisfy their hunger for trade goods, and more and better weapons made them more powerful. Objects which had been unknown and unneeded in prehistoric times were now necessities which no smartly-dressed, well-equipped Teton could be without.

By the mid-nineteenth century the Lakota would rarely be more than a few days ride from a trading post, and a wide variety of metal ornaments, peace medals, jewelry, beads, cloth, paints, and craft implements were available to those who were able to pay the price in bison hides.

The earliest peace medals given to Lakota leaders and men of status were distributed as gifts from Spanish and British emissaries, who were competing with each
other for trading access to different Lakota tribes around 1800. They were made of solid silver, were roughly two and a half inches in diameter, and bore an image of their country’s king. The U.S. government issued peace medals to the Lakota a few years later in 1804, bearing an image of Thomas Jefferson on one side and the words “Peace and Friendship” on the other side (Hanson 1975). These silver peace medals, ranging from two to three inches in diameter in a variety of different designs, were continually issued by U.S. presidents throughout the nineteenth century (figure 3.12); they were displayed by Lakota males as symbols of prestige and authority, regardless of whether they were received as gifts or purchased from a trader (Hanson 1975).

As the demand for bison hides increased in the 1830s and 1840s and fur traders became more established in Lakota territory, fur trade companies began issuing their own peace medals. In 1833, the Upper Missouri Outfit of the American Fur Company issued a silver medal bearing an image of its owner John Jacob Astor. One year later, when Pierre Chouteau Jr. purchased the Upper Missouri Outfit from the American Fur Company, he issued four inch copper medals bearing his own image. Throughout the nineteenth century, peace medals made of silver, bronze, pewter, copper, and aluminum persisted as status symbols and can often be identified in photographs of Lakota men. They continued to be produced into the early twentieth century when they were issued to Native American performers by Wild West Shows (Hanson 1975).

A number of other types of metal ornaments were purchased from fur traders and displayed by Lakota men, women, and children as status symbols. While gold and silver ornaments were preferred by Eastern tribes, precious metals were not in high demand on the Plains and the Lakota appear to have preferred brass, which was cheaper and offered traders a higher profit margin. In the 1860s, the alloy German silver became available and was also in high demand by the Lakota, who either purchased ready-made decorations or bought sheets of German silver to produce their own designs (Hanson 1975).

Ready-made metal jewelry and ornaments offered to the Lakota by fur traders between 1800 and 1880 consisted of ear bobs, rings, bracelets, arm bands, hair plates, pectorals, crosses, belt discs, brass beads and tacks, glass beads, and a number of different types of bells; however, these were not all in style at the same time and trends seemed to come and go (Hanson 1975). Hair plates, for instance, were most popular during the first half of the nineteenth century, after which their use declined. Hair plates were worn by
men and consisted of a row of ten to twenty silver or brass plates, typically descending in size from four inches in diameter to the size of a dime. These discs would be strung on a leather strip and attached to the back of the head, hanging down to the waist. They were heavy and expensive, but very fashionable.

The earliest mention of the hair plate comes from an Oglala winter count recorded by No Ears in 1786, when the most memorable event of the year involved a Lakota warrior named Metal Hair Ornament entering an enemy camp. That this man was named for his hair ornament is significant, as is the early date and the fact that the event was commemorated in a winter count. Early explorers on the Plains also commented on the use of hair plates by the Lakota, including Maximilian, and early paintings of Lakota males often depicted them (Hanson 1975).

Luther Standing Bear discussed hair plates in his autobiographical texts, commenting that his father, a leader among the Oglala, considered him a “very valuable boy” because of the way he was dressed up for special occasions (Standing Bear 1933:23).

I remember that my father made for me a very long, heavy ornament for my hair. I disliked very much to wear this headpiece, for it was made of six or eight silver disks, graduated in size, and strung on buckskin. It was a wonderful ornament to be sure, but its weight was something to be appreciated and furthermore it was tied to what white people are pleased to call the ‘scalp lock.’ Now when my father dressed me up for some festivity he would paint my face, smooth my hair and tie my confirmation plume at the left side of the head at the top, and tie the silver ornament so that it hung down the back of my head. I always went as father dressed me and never told him how uncomfortable I felt (Standing Bear 1933:23-24).

Standing Bear’s comments indicate that men’s hair plates maintained their strength as a costly signal well into the 1870s; conversely, Hanson (1975) claims that hair plates went out of fashion after the Civil War due to their resemblance to women’s belt disks, which became popular at that time. Perhaps it was still fashionable for young boys to wear hair
plates after the 1860s, while men chose not to.

Women attached belt disks to long, wide leather belts, often referred to as conch belts; some wrapped only around a woman or girl’s waist, while other, more elaborate belts boasted an additional strip of leather which hung from the hip to the ankles, and occasionally trailed on the ground. The metal disks on this hanging strip descended in size from larger to smaller, in a manner similar to men’s hair plates (Hanson 1975). Women’s belts of this style were also fashioned from saddle leather and, in lieu of belt disks, were decorated with hundreds of brass tacks arranged in geometric designs (Berlo 2007).

Bells made of iron and brass were increasingly popular decorations throughout the nineteenth century, and were often strung on leather and worn as ankle bracelets by men, especially when dancing. Women also attached bells to their dresses and robes, and to children’s clothing and accessories. Also popular were tin jingles, which were made by the Lakota from sheet and scrap metal and attached to clothing, containers, and bags. They made a tinkling sound in motion and became popular after 1850, replacing hoof or dewclaw clusters, which had previously been attached to items in order to make a pleasant sound. Thimbles were also punctured and used as jingles (Hanson 1975). Hunkpapa Lakota dancer Jodi Gillette commented that dewclaws, bells, and jingles served the purpose of alerting others when one was approaching, making it easier to observe the strict avoidance rules that governed Lakota kinship protocol (Her Many Horses 2007).

Hairpipe breastplates preceded the fur trade era, but gained in popularity among Lakota males after 1850. They were originally made from dozens of long tubular beads carved from shell, and were acquired from Southeastern tribes at great expense through indigenous trade routes; however, fur traders began offering less expensive hairpipe beads
manufactured from cattle bone, sparking off a new trend (Hanson 1975). As mentioned above, hairpipe breastplates were part of the regalia identifying members of the Badgers *akicita* (Wissler 1912). An alternative style of hairpipe breastplate resembling a long sash-like necklace was also worn by Lakota women and girls after 1870.

A phenomenon similar to the introduction of imitation hairpipe beads occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century involving highly prized and valuable elk teeth, but with different results. The tribes of the Plains had always valued the ivory canine teeth of the elk, which maintained their value due to their rarity. Only two of these teeth were acquired each time an elk was taken down, so a young girl or woman who owned a dress decorated with many elk teeth displayed her high standing, the wealth of her family, and the hunting prowess of her male kin (Her Many Horses 2007). Denig (1961), a fur trader among the Lakota, valued 100 elk teeth as being worth a horse, or about $50.00, around 1850; he also noted that a prestigious woman’s dress could be decorated with over 300 teeth and, considering the value of the hide and other decorations, was worth well over $200.00. Dresses decorated with elk teeth and other ornaments would sometimes be made by a high status male’s female relatives with teeth he had been collecting since boyhood, as a gift for his prospective bride (Berlo 2007).

At some point after the Civil War, however, imitation elk teeth carved from bone began being offered by fur traders. In some tribes, among the Crow for instance, the low priced imitation elk teeth were widely purchased and used profusely to decorate dresses made from wool trade cloth (Her Many Horses 2007). Among the Lakota, imitation elk teeth appear not to have been as popular; instead, after 1870, an elaborate, fully beaded yoke became the “trademark” of Lakota women’s dresses (Her Many Horses 2007:44).
Beads were offered by eighteenth century fur traders in extremely limited quantities, but became more abundant over the course of the nineteenth century. In *Quill and Beadwork of the Western Sioux* (1983:56), Carrie Lyford gives a thorough description of pony beads.

From about 1800 to 1840 a large opaque irregular china bead came into use on the Plains. It was known as the pony bead because it was brought in by the pony pack trains. The pony bead was made in Venice. It was about 1/8 inch in diameter, about twice as large as the beads used later. White and a medium sky blue were the colors in which the pony beads were commonly used. Black pony beads also appear in the old pieces. A few buff, light and dark red, and dark blue pony beads have also been noted.

In 1805, a few articles of clothing decorated with bands of pony beads were collected from Plains tribes by Lewis and Clark (Lyford 1983). In his journal, Clark commented that among Plains tribes, “blue beads occupy the place which gold has with us. White beads may be considered as our silver” (Berlo 2007:111).

Before beads were available, Lakota women had decorated clothing and other items with earth paints and quillwork, but natural paints and dyes lacked the vibrant colors of glass beads. Blue beads, in particular, were prized because a true natural blue dye had not been discovered on the Plains; in addition, porcupine quills were difficult and costly to acquire, and the production of quillwork was extremely labor-intensive (Lyford 1983). While beadwork also required a significant time investment, it appears to have been welcomed as an efficient alternative to quillwork. Painting, beadwork, and quillwork will be addressed in more detail below.

In 1840, fur traders began to offer seed beads to the Lakota. Seed beads were smaller than pony beads and available in a wider variety of colors. They were typically sold in bunches of five or six strings, with each string being four to six inches long (Orchard 1975;
Lyford 1983). At Fort McPherson, a trading post located near the confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers which opened in 1863, the price of one bunch of seed beads was one beaver skin (Orchard 1975). Orchard (1975:102) explains that this was an exorbitant price, but “the transportation to many of the almost inaccessible trading posts, both for the beads coming in and the skins coming out, alone was a matter of consideration.”

Despite dangerous conditions and high transportation costs, fur traders on the Plains and the companies that owned them generated an enormous amount of income over the course of the nineteenth century. It is estimated that 100,000 bison cowskin hides a year were brought to market between 1833 and 1843, and this rate increased over the ensuing decades (Sundstrom 2002). Klein (1983:154) notes that in 1850 over 100,000 hides were shipped to St. Louis and an additional 300,000 were in the process of being traded; furthermore, he goes on to say that “from 1850 to 1883 the hide trade rose meteorically.” According to Susan Bettelyoun Bordeaux, daughter of prominent fur trader James Bordeaux, “the fur trader made big profits; the money went fast. For nearly two centuries, a million dollars a year has been estimated to have been made in the fur trade” (Bettelyoun Bordeaux and Waggoner 1998).

The Lakota likewise benefited from the fur trade. Utilitarian implements like axes, kettles, scissors, hide scrapers, arrowheads, and guns reduced time and labor costs for women and men. As the consumption of trade goods and displays of adornment became increasingly important over the course of the nineteenth century in raising the status of individuals, families, and kin groups, it became necessary for the Lakota to find a way to forge more permanent relationships with fur traders.
3.7 Marriage, Polygyny, and the Role of Women in the Fur Trade

As early as 1830, daughters from prominent Lakota families began to intermarry with fur traders (Bettelyoun Bordeaux and Waggoner 1998). Sundstrom (2002:114) discusses how these marriages benefitted both the Lakota and the traders.

The most successful traders took Indian wives. Because the access to trade goods afforded by such unions tended to raise the status of the family, powerful or ambitious families encouraged such marriages among their young women. These women brought to the marriage powerful kin and community networks. These in turn lent the trader a degree of personal protection and provided him ready-made trade connections. Such marriages were mutually beneficial in according added status to the woman’s family and giving them some control over trade networks on the one hand and in securing the traders social and economic support on the other.

In her autobiography, Susan Bettelyoun Bordeaux discusses her father’s marriages. In 1837, at the age of twenty three, French trader James Bordeaux married a woman who was Cheyenne and Arikara and they had two children. Four years later, he married again, this time to a Lakota woman from a prominent family, the niece of Sicangu chief Swift Bear. Only nineteen years old, Red Cormorant Woman had compiled an impressive list of accomplishments. She had been awarded the honors of being a banner bearer for the tribe and a pipe bearer in the White Buffalo ceremony; she was also Hunkayapi. While the prestige attached to participants in these ceremonies will be addressed in greater detail below, it should be noted that a girl with this pedigree would have had her choice of high status marriage partners (Walker 1980). James Bordeaux and Marie, as she came to be known, lived long and illustrious lives and had seven children. Years later, Bordeaux married a third Lakota woman and fathered three more children (Bettelyoun Bordeaux and Waggoner 1998). Bordeaux was by no means unusual, as it was very common for fur traders to marry polygynously into Lakota and other Plains tribes. This intermarriage
underlines the importance of prestige trade goods in Lakota social and political economy.

Women were not only valued as a means to secure lucrative trading relationships through marriage, however; the economic and material rewards generated through the trade of bison hides on the Plains depended heavily on the labor of women (Hassrick 1964; Klein 1983; Schneider 1983; Sundstrom 2002). While bison hunting on horseback had greatly increased the number of hides that were brought in by Lakota males, the labor intensive task of properly processing the hides fell entirely on the women and the use of metal scrapers did not significantly increase efficiency. Klein (1983) notes that an average hunter mounted on a decent buffalo horse could net four to eight bison in a hunt. Hassrick (1964) calculated that it took one woman roughly ten days to tan a hide, although that time could be reduced if she were freed from other tasks. This imbalance between the relative ease of hunting bison and the time it took to process hides not only points to the importance of female labor, it also underscores the need for plural wives. As bridewealth was calculated in horses, only men of status or successful horse raiders could afford to marry polygynously. These prestigious men monopolized the labor necessary to generate hides for trade, acquiring the prestigious goods and materials that served to further reinforce their own status, as well as the status of their wives, children, and kin group.

The common practice of wife-stealing and bride abduction, along with the capture of women and girls during intertribal warfare, points to the importance of female labor as well suggesting the possibility of a shortage of marriageable women due to the practice of polygyny. Wife-stealing was akin to counting coup, and was prohibited only between men belonging to the same warrior society; all other women were fair game (Hassrick 1964). Bride capture was also an acceptable means of acquiring a wife and was increasingly
common at large encampments over the course of the nineteenth century; for this reason, young women were typically chaperoned at social events or any other time they were required to be away from their family’s tipi. Women captured during warfare were also sought as marriage partners, while captured girls were often adopted and eventually married into the tribe. Captive women were attractive as marriage partners because bride-price was expensive: the average cost of securing a bride was eight horses and enough robes for a tipi, and young women of high status commanded a great many more horses and gifts (Hassrick 1964).

Because of the intensive labor required to process hides, early explorers and anthropologists often viewed Native American women on the Plains as “drudges” and “slaves,” although in recent years this view has been disputed (Schneider 1983:102). Sundstrom (2002:114-115) describes how the fur trade affected the status of Lakota women.

The high demand for tanned and decorated hides, together with new means of procuring buffalo, was a mixed blessing for women. Because women generally monopolized the skills needed to produce finished hides, their labor was in high demand. This undoubtedly placed women in a better position to negotiate marriages, whether to traders or Native men. Young girls were expected to become proficient hide-workers before marriage…their prowess in this regard was publicly displayed and rewarded. On the other hand, more of women’s time was demanded for hide production. Since the social status of a woman, her husband, and her entire kin group increasingly depended on their access to trade goods obtained through the hide trade, women were pressured to produce ever more hides for trade.

Lakota women worked very hard, but their labor was rewarded by higher status for themselves and their kin, public recognition, and better marriage opportunities. Studies conducted in a number of traditional societies looking at the status of women suggest that in groups where women make important economic contributions, their status is generally
higher (Draper 1975); on the other hand, Leacock (1978) argued that the labor demands of processing skins for the fur trade and absorption into a market economy had seriously eroded the status of women among the Montagnais-Naskapi and other indigenous groups. A detailed look at the ways in which Lakota women signaled their prestige and skill through various types of craft production, membership in women’s societies, and ritual participation, as well as the benefits they accrued as a result of this signaling provides clarification.

3.8 Signals of Skill and Prestige by Lakota Women

There were a number of different ways in which nineteenth century Lakota women could signal their prestige, social standing, and domestic skills through the display and production of elaborate clothing and body decoration. Of primary importance were displays of personal adornment. By wearing elaborately decorated dresses, accessories, and prestige trade goods, unmarried girls and married women signaled that their fathers and husbands possessed the wealth necessary to trade for the materials, jewelry, and “Chinese Red” vermillion pigment with which they adorned themselves (Berlo 2007:118; Her Many Horses 2007). As discussed above, the materials required to produce a dress ornamented with dozens of elk teeth, rows of quillwork, or large panels of beadwork were extremely costly whether calculated in bison cow skins, horses, or U.S. dollars. Other accessories including women’s decorated robes, leggings, moccasins, belts, bags, and jewelry added to this cost in materials. The time spent producing these lavishly decorated items of clothing and adornment must also be considered as costly.

Lakota women had been decorating items with small amounts of porcupine quillwork for at least a century before they moved onto the Plains from the Great Lakes
region. An extremely labor intensive process, porcupine quills needed to be washed, dyed (red, yellow, or black), softened by holding them in the mouth, and flattened by dragging them between the teeth (Lyford 1983). Next, they were either wrapped around a slender piece of leather fringe or a lock of horse hair, braided together, or folded and sewn directly onto leather. Once the quilled sections were completed, they were often flattened once again with a bone implement called a “quill flattener” (Lyford 1983:44). After the Lakota moved onto the Plains, quillwork became even more costly, as porcupine quills needed to be acquired through trade from groups dwelling in forested areas. While beadwork replaced quillwork as the preferred decoration on most Lakota clothing, moccasins, and accessories after 1840, certain religious and ceremonial items continued to be decorated with quillwork, even through to the present day (Lyford 1983; Wissler 1912).

As mentioned above, beadwork was less labor intensive than quillwork and welcomed as a more efficient and colorful means of decoration by Lakota women. Because quillwork had traditionally been laid out in geometric designs in rows or panels, beads were easily substituted into this pre-existing form of decoration. The Lakota and other Plains tribes innovated a unique style of beadworking referred to as the “lazy stitch,” which involved stitching lines of six beads each directly on to leather in rows. As these rows were repeated creating large panels, the effect was a pleasing and colorful geometric design with distinct ridges (Lyford 1983). One should not be misled by the name lazy stitch, however; while beadwork was less labor intensive than quillwork, it was still extremely time consuming.

One indication of this comes from The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), who commissioned an experienced, award-winning mother and daughter beading
team to make a Plains beaded dress and accessories for their 2007 exhibit, *Identity by Design: Tradition, Change and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses* (figure 3.13).

Over the summer of 2006, Joyce and Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty each worked over 110 hours a week to produce the Give Away Horses outfit, which included a dress, moccasins, leggings, belt, purse, and other elaborately beaded items (NMAI 2007).

Bol (1985), also discussing the substantial time commitment involved in beadwork production by Lakota women, reported that a division of labor was worked out between daughters and their mothers or mothers-in-law where the older women would perform the heavy labor and child care, freeing women of child-bearing age up for the production of beadwork and quillwork. This arrangement points to the social importance of producing elaborately decorated clothing, moccasins, and accessories, as well as its time consuming nature.

The prestige-garnering nature of elaborately beaded clothing is also indicated by the manner in which the preferred style of Lakota women’s dresses evolved over the course of the nineteenth century. In the first few decades of the 1800s, the side-fold dress was typical (Her Many Horses 2007). It consisted of one deer skin which was wrapped around the body under the arms and sewn together on the side, leaving the shoulders bare. Because Euro-American trade goods were relatively rare during this period, side-fold dresses were probably painted by women with geometric designs using earth paints; a few rare examples from this early period also boast strips of quillwork or small panels of pony beads. A Lakota side-fold dress held in the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian, one of only eleven known Plains side-fold dresses, is decorated with quillwork, pony beads, and tin cone jingles (figure 3.14). According to Her Many Horses (2007:23-24), “The combination of the traditional art of quillwork with the use of trade goods on this dress indicates that the skilled artist was a person of high social status whose family was able to trade for valuable materials.”

Around 1830, throughout the Plains, the side-fold dress was replaced by the two-hide dress, which allowed women to ride on horseback due to a fuller skirt (Her Many
Figure 3.14. Woman’s Side Fold Dress, circa 1830, attributed Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (2/9801). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Figure 3.15. Girl’s Two-skin Dress, circa 1850, Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (5/3776). Photo by NMAI Photo Services. The increased use of blue pony beads and the addition of over 60 elk teeth point to the wealth and status of the wearer.
Figure 3.16. Woman’s Two-skin Dress, circa 1855, Sihasapa Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (15/9288). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Horses 2007); however, it also offered a full bodice and long sleeves on which large panels of beadwork could be applied. The original two-hide dress was put together in a way that allowed the animal’s (deer, elk, or big horn sheep) intact tail to form a central design on the center of the bodice below the neck (figure 3.15). As beads became more readily available the Lakota quickly replaced the tail with a beaded U-shaped design (figure 3.16) (Her Many Horses 2007).

By 1870, Lakota women typically added a third hide to the upper bodice of the two-hide dress in order to create a “larger decorative surface” for beading (Her Many Horses 2007:44). The added expense of an extra hide and many more beads is significant. Compared to dresses from other Plains tribes, Lakota dresses tend to be more extravagantly beaded and decorated. According to NMAI associate curator Emil Her Many Horses (2007:44), “From the 1870s on, yokes completely covered in beadwork became a trademark of dresses made by Sioux women.” Figures 3.17 and 3.18 are examples of elaborately beaded Lakota three-hide dresses, popular from 1865 through the early reservation period.
Figure 3.17. Woman’s Three-skin Dress, circa 1870, Sicangu Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (16/2493). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Figure 3.18. Girl’s Two-skin Dress, circa 1865, Lakota (attributed). National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (5/958). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
A Lakota woman adorned in high style represented an enormous investment of resources in terms of time, labor, and materials, and only wealthy families could afford that investment. If a family could afford these costs, however, a splendidly adorned woman attracted much attention. Standing Bear (1933:152) discusses his Uncle Brave Eagle’s reaction upon seeing his future wife for the first time.

One night the braves were having a Victory Dance. A beautiful young girl in an elk-tooth-trimmed dress and riding a handsome spotted pony decorated with a quilled and fringed blanket that covered it to the heels, rode up and joined the crowd of onlookers. This young woman soon had the admiring eyes of all the young braves, and Uncle Brave Eagle was among the many who were smitten with her charms. Though already dressed in his regalia, my uncle went home to put on more finery and to repaint his face. He then picked out his best horse and came back to the dance to wait until the people began to disperse. Watching his chance he joined the young lady and her woman companion as they rode home. Thus began a courtship that ended in the marriage of Brave Eagle and this beautiful young woman.

The significance of this woman’s adornment is clearly stated, as is Brave Eagle’s need to more elaborately adorn himself in order to signal his status. While unmarried males and females in most societies attempt to attract each other with their good looks and displays of self-decoration, the Lakota took this “exhibitionism” to an extreme (Hassrick 1964:76).

Lakota women also garnered prestige based on the quantity and quality of the items of adornment they produced for their kin. By making elaborately decorated clothing, moccasins, tanned robes, and accessories for their children, husbands, fathers, and brothers, Lakota women not only enhanced their own prestige, they also raised the status of their family and kin group (Bol 1985). Figure 3.19 depicts an ornately beaded sheath, illustrating how even the most utilitarian items were decorated by Lakota women. An extravagantly beaded little girl’s dress, belt, and accessories (figures 3.20- 3.22), including fully beaded moccasin soles, shows the care taken to outfit children in high style.
Figure 3.19. “Green River” Knife and Sheath, circa 1880, Sicangu Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (1/3959). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Figure 3.20. Girl’s Dress, circa 1890, Sicangu Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (16/2323). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Figure 3.21. Girl’s Belt and Accessories (Awl Case, Sheath, Spoon and Pouch), circa 1900, Sicangu Lakota. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (16/2518).

Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Figure 3.22. Girl’s Moccasins with Beaded Soles, circa 1900, Lakota. National Museum of the
American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (6/2015). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Moccasins with beaded soles were originally interpreted as burial moccasins, due to the fact that the delicate beadwork on the soles would not have withstood wear; however, autobiographical accounts indicate that beaded soles were actually status indicators. According to one Cheyenne woman’s account, beaded moccasin soles indicated that a child was so treasured by her family that they would not allow her feet touch the ground (Marriott and Rachlin 1977, cited in Her Many Horses 2007). These elaborately beaded child’s items date to the early reservation period, when Lakota beadwork reached its zenith.

Hassrick (1964:42) described the manner in which women signaled their skills in the domestic arts.

In the same way that men kept war records, so did women keep count of their accomplishments. Ambition to excel was real among females. Accomplishments were recorded by means of dots incised along the handles of the polished elkhorn scraping tools. The dots on one side were black, on the other red. Each black dot represented a tanned robe; each red dot represented ten hides or one tipi. When a woman had completed one hundred robes or ten tipis, she was privileged to place an incised circle at the base of the handle of the scraper.

These robe and tipi tallies, in addition to the elaborately decorated goods produced for themselves and their families, allowed women to signal their production skills in a direct and public manner.

At large encampments, contests were held in which unmarried girls and married women gained prestige based on the quantity of elaborately quilled and decorated items they had produced, and the results of these contests were publicly displayed (Hassrick 1964; Schneider 1983). Hassrick (1964) describes how, at the appointed time and place, women sat in a circle and placed their goods before them. The hostess of the event would go from woman to woman, handing each a stick for every piece of work they had finished,
whether they had brought it with them or not. Sticks received for work completed before puberty were placed to the left of each woman, and sticks received for items made after puberty were placed on the right. The top four producers were singled out and seated in a special place, and received their food first at the meal that ensued (Hassrick 1964). After eating, the women went to the large council lodge at the center of the encampment to record their tallies on the tipi lining for public display.

Small marks were made to represent the work done prior to puberty, larger marks for later work, and over them was the maker’s name. Thus, Rattling Blanket Woman’s ten small marks and four large ones were designated by the drawing of a rattle superimposed on a blanket with a line extending from it to the marks. This was her “quilling count,” and just as a man displayed his war honors in the Red Council Lodge, so a woman displayed her abilities. Since women were in reality the producers of consumption goods, it was fitting that emphasis should be placed on this industry. And to the industrious came not only tangible wealth but prestige (Hassrick 1964:43).

As mentioned, many of these items, including clothing, moccasins, cradleboards, and robes, were made to be worn and displayed by family members, bringing further prestige to the family and kin group.

Decorated cradleboards were particularly indicative of high status. While all Lakota infants were carried in cradles on their mother’s backs until they were about six months old, the cradleboards of high status families were entirely elaborately quilled or beaded (figure 3.23). Custom dictated that a woman must make cradleboards for her brother’s children, and if she failed to do this, it negatively affected his social status (Bol 1985).
George Catlin (1841:132), an artist and ethnographer who visited the Plains in the 1830s, was fascinated with the “beautifully ornamented cradles” of the Lakota. Catlin painted two different portraits of Lakota women with their cradleboards (figures 3.28 and 3.29) and gave the following description of one he had purchased from a Lakota woman.

The bandages that pass around the cradle, holding the child in, are all the way covered with a beautiful embroidery of porcupine quills, with ingenious figures of horses, men, etc. A broad hoop of elastic wood passes around the front of the child’s face, to protect it in case of a fall, from the front of which is suspended a little toy of exquisite embroidery, for the child to handle and amuse itself with. To this and other little trinkets hanging in front of it, there are attached many little tinseled and tinkling things, of the brightest colours, to amuse both the eyes and ears of the child (Catlin 1841:132).
Catlin points out that not all cradles are “so much ornamented as in the present instance” indicating that many families were unable to afford such elaborate decoration (Catlin 1841:133). Hassrick (1964:42) notes, “Cradles were recognized as the tour de force in female craftsmanship and invariably brought to the maker acclaim and even wealth, since a cradle was equal in value to one horse.”

Saddle blankets and elaborately decorated riding gear were also made by prestigious families to adorn their horses, especially after 1850 (Mace 1991). Standing Bear’s (1933:152) discussion of his Uncle Brave Eagle’s prospective bride noted that her pony was adorned with a “quilled and fringed blanket that covered it to the heels.” Some of these saddle blankets were particularly lavish, and their production cost in terms of beads or quills, hides, labor, and time was substantial (figure 3.24); in addition, horses were often painted and their manes and tails were also decorated, as were their hooves. Figure 3.25 depicts a set of ornate horse hoof ornaments. As with beaded clothing and accessories, horse decorations show a steady increase in the degree of elaboration over time.

While displayed by men, women, and children of high status, the vast majority of these horse decorations were produced by women, bringing prestige to her entire family. According to Mace (1991:44), “As household art, horse gear serves to notify the onlooker of the talents of the family, and their good taste. Loeb has described the horse as a ‘large kinetic means of display, like great moving billboards… a means to demonstrate industry, wealth, and pride’ (1983:312).” Elaborately beaded masks were also fashioned for horses, and two examples of these are pictured in figures 3.26 and 3.27. For a high status Lakota family in the nineteenth century, these extravagant saddle blankets, masks, and horse accessories would have communicated their wealth and prestige in no uncertain terms.
Figure 3.24. Beaded Saddle Blanket, circa 1890, Lakota (Attributed). National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (8530). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
Figure 3.25. Horse Hoof Ornaments, circa 1890, Lakota (Attributed). National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (2/9627). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
The fabulously decorated clothing, accessories, moccasins, cradleboards and horse decorations produced and displayed by Lakota women were important elements in establishing their own prestige, as well as the prestige of their husbands, fathers, brothers, children, and kin groups. The production of these items was extremely costly in terms of time, energy, and materials, and the finished products, even in the nineteenth century, could be worth hundreds of dollars. Lakota women were known throughout the Plains for their profusely decorated and heavily beaded dresses, which became increasingly extravagant over the course of the nineteenth century and even into the early reservation period. Women were able to advertise their skill and industriousness through displaying hide and tipi counts on their tools and on the walls of the council lodge, as well as by
winning contests. The degree of embellishment of a woman’s attire, as well as that of her family, would have been an easily-observed indicator of wealth, status, access to trade goods, and the prestige of the wearer.

3.9 Women’s Societies and Medicine Cults

There were a few different societies for women who were particularly adept at producing elaborately quilled or beaded goods, and some of these women’s societies even assisted in the production of men’s society regalia and war medicine (Wissler 1912). The Women’s Medicine Cult consisted of three divisions of women who had received powerful buffalo, horse, or elk medicine dreams and, as a result, were able to produce war shields and wotawe (war medicine). According to Wissler (1912:99), “Young men about to go to war would apply to them for medicines and receive a bird skin, feathers, etc. with a small bag of medicine attached.”

In summer (June) it was the rule to hold an annual ceremony, or dance…Those warriors that received the medicines the preceding winter came forward one by one to count off their deeds. Thus, it could be shown which of the three divisions had the most wakan power. The women then formed a procession around the camp, dancing before the tipis of head men like the akicita societies. Before the close of the ceremonies in their tipi, they forecast the war record of the next year. The women were not paid for the war medicine, but received a share of the spoils (Wissler 1912:99).

Wissler does not describe any special regalia associated with the Women’s Medicine Cult, but it is likely that the members would have displayed their membership in some way, perhaps with a representation of the animal they had received their dreaming powers from.

The Double Woman Cult was one of the more fascinating Lakota dreaming societies, bringing to the forefront the spiritual and societal importance of quillwork. The Double Woman played an important role in Lakota cosmology and was greatly feared, especially by men. The supernatural being consisted of two tall women connected by a membrane or
cord. Dorsey (1894:480) gives the following description of the Double Woman.

The two lived in a lodge on a very high black cliff. They were always laughing immoderately, as if they were strangers to sorrow. On pleasant evenings they stood on a hill, where they amused themselves by swinging. Should any Indian see them, when he reached home he vomited something resembling black earth, and died suddenly...No one knew from what quarter the Double Woman was coming, and how the two lived was a mystery.

The Lakota believed that quillwork was originally brought to them by the Double Woman.

According to Wissler (1912:92), “It is said that once a young woman dreamed of the Double Woman who taught her the use of quills. Before this no one imagined porcupine quills of any practical value.”

The Double Woman Cult was made up of members who had all received a Double Woman dream, and thereafter had unequalled skills in quillwork production. In the Double Woman dream, a woman was led to a tipi and was asked by the Double Woman to choose which side she would enter.

Along the wall of one side is a row of skin dressing tools, on the other, a row of parfleche headdress bags. If the former is chosen, they will say, “You have chosen wrong, but you will become very rich.” If she choose the other side, they will say, “You are on the right track, all you shall have shall be an empty bag.” This means she will be a prostitute and otherwise an evil woman. In the future she may wear a miniature headdress pouch as a symbol of her experience. Such women are wakan, but not regarded as exactly normal; they are always running after men and have unusual powers to seduce them (Wissler 1912:93).

Having chosen correctly, the woman experiencing the dream would become a medicine woman, a member of the Double Woman Cult, and only rarely marry or have children (Hassrick 1964; Schneider 1983). Should a man experience a Double Woman dream, he had to choose between skin dressing tools on one side and bows and arrows on the other. If he chose the skin dressing tools he had to live as a winkte (transgendered), but like female
Double Woman dreamers, would possess unparalleled skills in quillwork (Wissler 1912).

The Double Woman Cult often produced the quillwork used to decorate men’s society regalia, lances, and weapons. According to Wissler (1912:94), “This is a powerful cult and many women when in trance get power to make very effective shields and other war medicines.” DeMallie (1983:247) discusses a contemporary Double Woman dreamer from Standing Rock Reservation, underscoring the perceived supernatural abilities that these women possessed in quillwork and beadwork.

A woman could dream of the Double Woman and they would teach her songs. One such woman used to live here. She could do the quill or beadwork on one side of a pair of moccasins, place it against the blank one, sit on it, sing the song, and both would be done. Or she could even just put the quills between the moccasin blanks, sit on them, sing the song, and it would be finished, whatever it was. But this woman died a terrible death because of her evil life and while dying she cried and screamed.

At Double Woman feasts, the cult members paraded thorough camp, laughing wildly and performing a dance that involved flashing mirrors at people, causing spectators to fall to the ground and spit up black dirt and blood (DeMallie 1983; Wissler 1912). The two leaders of the cult attached a cord between them from which was suspended a small doll. According to Wissler (1912:94), “This was said to signify that all their offspring will die.”

Double Woman dreamers were also considered to be very sexually promiscuous and were believed to have the power to drive men crazy with desire. They were recognized by a spider design painted on their robes (Schneider 1983), or by representations of swallows on their clothing (Hasrick 1964). Figure 3.28 depicts a bag with the sort of exceptional quillwork attributed to Double Woman dreamers, and the spider design suggests it may have indeed been produced by a Double Woman Cult member.
Figure 3.28. Quilled Bag with Spider Design, circa 1890, Lakota (Attributed). National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (20/8123). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.
There were also two Lakota women’s societies that could best be described as craft guilds. The Porcupine Quill Workers society may have been associated with the Double Woman Cult, perhaps made up of those women who chose not to become medicine women, but who were still highly skilled in quillwork (Hassrick 1964; Wissler 1912). Members of the Porcupine Quill Workers society were also drawn from the winners of quillwork contests and other women possessing notable beading and quilling skills (Hassrick 1964). They held exhibitions, contests, and feasts at which they discussed their techniques, designs, and the number of items they had made. They also made gifts to each other (Wissler 1912). The Tanners society was similar, consisting of women who excelled at tipi making. When a woman needed to make a new tipi cover, she could prepare a feast and invite all the tipi-makers to come and help (Wissler 1912). Members of these women’s societies earned income and status due to the high quality of their work (DeMallie 1983; Hassrick 1964; Schneider 1983).

People sought out the women who could do intricate quilling, who made handsome cradles, who wove the best buffalo-hair rope. There were good beaders and poor beaders, good tanners and poor ones, and there was a market for well and beautifully made articles. Specialists could demand a high price in goods for their work, and they also received approbation and prestige (Hassrick 1964:196).

Perhaps the wealth received by those excelling in craft production explains the strange prediction from the Double Woman dream, “You have chosen wrong, but you will become very rich” (Wissler 1912:93).

The Winyan Tapika (Praiseworthy Women) was a women’s society briefly discussed by Wissler (1912). It consisted of high status women of all ages who danced together wearing their best dresses, their hair loose over their shoulders, and headdresses made of otter skin and decorated with eagle feathers.
Their hands and arms were painted red; faces, red with four blue marks, two on the median plane (chins and forehead), two transversely on the cheeks. The meetings were held in a tipi, the back part covered with sage grass. A pipe, two drums, two rattles, and a shaman’s medicine bag are required. A shaman leads the ceremony to represent the founder or dreamer of the ritual. A few other men are called in to drum and sing (Wissler 1912:80).

According to Wissler, the Praiseworthy Women society was borrowed from a northern tribe and in later years was known as the *Wakan Wacipi* (holy dance).

Through their participation in women’s societies, Lakota women were able to advertise their skill in the production of quillwork and beadwork, as well as receive public recognition and even earn income (Schneider 1983). If a woman were a member of a medicine cult, she would be feared, yet renowned, for her skills and spiritual power, and had the opportunity to share in the spoils of war through the production of war medicine. Through membership in the Praiseworthy Women, Lakota women of high status gained an additional avenue through which to advertise their prestige. Women’s societies were yet one more element of the society-wide phenomenon of costly signaling through personal adornment.

### 3.10 Ceremonial Participation, Feasting, Give-Aways, and Dances as Costly Signaling

There were a number of ceremonial rites of passage and rituals through which Lakota men, women, and children could garner prestige and earn the right to display costly signals of their participation. Through their involvement in these events, not only did the participants themselves gain prestige, but also their families and kin groups; in addition, finely decorated clothing, accessories, cradleboards, and riding gear were often distributed at feasts which followed ceremonies, and these also served to raise the status of Lakota individuals, families, and kin groups. Standing Bear (1933:15) discusses this, saying “The greatest brave was he who could part with his most cherished belongings and at the same
time sing songs of joy and praise. It was a custom to hold ‘Give-away-dances’ and to
distribute presents that were costly and rare.” A give-away accompanied all rites of
passage, ritual ceremonies, and inductions into men’s and women’s societies, and a
majority of the goods that were distributed were elaborately decorated items produced by
the women of the family hosting the event. Horses were also given away by men, often to
honor their children. The amount and quality of goods distributed was directly correlated
to the degree of prestige conferred on the family. It should be understood, however, that a
certain amount of reciprocity was assumed. Goldfrank (1943:77) discussed how costly
gifts were preferentially given to one’s kin group or other high status families so that they
could be drawn upon in times of need, saying “Such practices made for fluidity. They
increased the prestige of the giver, while they never threatened his security.”

The Tatanka Lowanpi (Buffalo Ceremony) was a rite of passage conducted for girls
after their first menstrual cycle; because of the expense associated with conducting the
ceremony, usually only girls of high status became “Buffalo Women” (Walker 1980:253).

The provisions for the ceremony which her parents are required to make are:
a tipi for the lodge, preferably a new one; a dress for the girl, preferably one
that has not been worn; a breechclout for the girl, preferably one that is
ornamented; a wooden bowl, preferably a new one; chokecherries, either
fresh or dried; an eagle plume with the quill wrapped with the skin from the
head of the mallard drake; sage brush; dried wood, either box elder or
cottonwood; a drum; a pipe; dried willow bark to smoke in the pipe;
sweetgrass; food for the feast and presents for the guests (Walker
1980:244).

It was preferred to have a shaman conduct the ceremony, the price of which was one horse.
Walker also notes that “the social prestige of the woman is in proportion to the number of
guests, the amount of the feast and the prodigality of the giving at this ceremony which is
her debut as a woman” (Walker 1980:243).
Towards the end of ceremony, the shaman painted the right half of the forehead and the part in the girl’s hair red, telling her of her responsibilities as a Buffalo Woman. In return, the buffalo spirit, Tatanka, would be pleased with her.

He will make brave men desire her so they will pay a large price for her. She may choose the man she desires. If he has other wives, she will sit next to the catku. They will carry wood while she makes moccasins. You are now a buffalo woman. You may paint your face this way (Walker 1980:251).

For the rest of her life, the girl would have the privilege of painting her face in this manner, so that everyone would know that she was a Buffalo Woman, “a class distinct from other women” (Walker 1980:253). Originally, red ochre was used for the face paint; however, after 1830, Chinese red vermillion pigment acquired from fur-traders was preferred, due to its brilliant color. According to Berlo (2007:118), “Vermillion was costly for the trader. He, in turn, marked it up so that it was even costlier for his Native American customers.” Saiiciye, a Lakota term meaning “adorning oneself in a ritually correct manner” literally translates into “to paint oneself red” (Berlo 2007:118). Figure 3.29, a painting by Plains artist George Catlin, depicts the vermillion paint of a Buffalo Woman.

Even more prestigious than the Buffalo Ceremony was the Hunka Ceremony. The source of this word is unknown and has no direct translation (Walker 1980), although it has sometimes been called the “making of relatives” (Brown 1953:101). The Hunka ceremony was performed in order to bind two unrelated people together, making them even closer than relatives, or Hunkaya (Walker 1980). Once the ceremony had been conducted, the two new Hunkaya joined the ranks of all the other Lakota who had participated in ceremony. The group was collectively known as Hunkayapi, and all Hunkayapi were expected to show each other preferential treatment in all matters (Walker 1980). Children who had been made Hunkayapi were called “children beloved” (Goldfrank 1943:75).
Men, women, and children were all eligible to become *Hunkayapi*, as long as someone had asked them to enter into a dyad and they were able to bear the cost of the ceremony. Walker (1980:219) discusses these costs.
When one wishes to become *Hunka*, he should consider well whether he can provide suitably for the feasts or not, for the standing of a *Hunkaya* among the *Hunkayapi* is in proportion to the lavishness of the gifts and feast at the ceremony that establishes his relation with them. He should give all his possessions for the occasion and should ask his kinspeople and friends to give for him. If this does not enable him to provide suitably, he should proceed no farther in the matter.

The mark of a *Hunkayapi* was a red stripe across the cheek, and those who had been through the ceremony would paint one stripe for every time they had been made *Hunka*.

Figure 3.30, also painted by George Catlin, depicts a Lakota woman whose status is clearly communicated by her beautifully decorated cradleboard, her elaborate clothing, and the three red *Hunkayapi* stripes painted on her cheek.

Walker’s informant, John Blunt Horn, discussed the responsibilities and benefits of being *Hunkayapi* (Walker 1980:205).

If a *Hunka* were hungry or naked and another *Hunka* knew this, he would give the hungry one something to eat, even if he had to take it out of his mouth to give it. He would give him something to wear, even if he had to take it off himself to give it. The braves were all *Hunka*. The shamans were all *Hunka*. The wise medicine men were nearly all *Hunka*. Little children that were *Hunka* were like the children of everyone that was *Hunka*. Old people that were *Hunka* were like parents to the children that were *Hunka*. Sometimes the *Hunka* had meetings to which no others were allowed to go. There were some secret things that were told to a *Hunka*, and to no one else. The secrets must not be told, except to a *Hunka*.

If a family desired to be prestigious, they must all be made *Hunka* (Goldfrank 1943; Hassrick 1964).

Women, unmarried girls, and children, most often *Hunkayapi*, gained status by being selected to participate in men’s ceremonies and societies. During the Sundance, for instance, it was the privilege of *Hunkayapi* children to ceremonially ‘cut down’ the Sundance pole (Walker 1980). *Akicita* and headmen’s societies usually chose four girls from prestigious families to be their singers. Wissler (1912:32) discusses how the Badgers
Figure 3.30. Sioux Mother with a Baby in a Cradleboard (color litho), Catlin, George (1794-1872). Private Collection, Peter Newark Western Americana, Courtesy of The Bridgeman Art Library, PNP 246136.
rewarded their singers.

The four singers are virgins. If they fall from grace, they are dismissed; if they marry, they must get the consent of the society which will make them valuable wedding presents. The husbands are taken into the society.

Men’s society regalia and clothing sometimes required beadwork, quillwork, or tanned hides which could only be made by virgins, and in exchange for their work, girls would be presented gifts and publicly honored (Wissler 1912).

The annual Sundance was an important men’s ceremony which involved a great deal of sacrifice, but was an integral component of establishing one’s reputation as a warrior and a man of consequence. A man announced his intention to Sundance a full year before participating in the ritual, and until the next summer he was required to abstain from sexual relations, host many feasts, and undergo ritual purifications and periods of fasting. He was prohibited from joining war parties, and was not allowed to fight even if his camp were attacked (Dorsey 1894). A large ceremonial give-away was also required, and according to Dorsey (1894:452), “All his female kindred make many pairs of moccasins and collect money and an abundance of all kinds of goods, in order to give presents to poor people at the time of the Sun Dance. Then they can make gifts to whomsoever they please.” During the Sundance, the men participating in the ritual would endure the pain of being skewered through the chest muscles and suspended by thongs from a central pole until they ripped free. The large and extremely visible scars which resulted from participating in the ceremony would attest to each man’s commitment to his tribe, his bravery, and his ability to withstand pain.

The Sun Dancers’ ritual scarification was witnessed by thousands of Lakota people during the annual gathering of the tribes; according to Fletcher (1882), the Lakota Sun
Dance encampment of 1882 was three-quarters of a mile wide and consisted of over 9,000 people. According to the account of George Bushotter, one of the few Lakota to write about the Sun Dance during the nineteenth century, other Plains tribes attended the annual Lakota Sun Dance as well.

When the devotees have performed all the preliminary duties required of them, messages are sent to all the neighboring tribes, i.e., the Omaha, Pawnee Loup, Cheyenne, Ree [Arikara], Hidatsa, Blackfeet, Nez Perce, Winnebago, Yankton, and Santee… The visitors from the different nations begin to come together in the spring, each tribe forming its separate camp. Though some of the visitors are hereditary enemies, it matters not during the sun-dance; they visit one another; they shake hands and form alliances. In this manner several weeks are spent very pleasantly (Bushotter, as summarized by Dorsey 1894:452).

While nearly every other Plains tribe performed some version of the Sun Dance, only among the Lakota was suspension from the central pole a formalized aspect of the Sun Dance, resulting in the highly visible ritual scars displayed by every man who participated in this ceremony (Spier 1921).

The most prestigious ceremony in Lakota society was the White Buffalo Ceremony; upon its completion, the man sponsoring this ceremony earned the title of shirt-wearer. It was held very rarely, and only after the completion of an elaborate and costly Spirit Keeping Ceremony (Hassrick 1964). Only the shaman conducting the ceremony and former White Buffalo Owners (shirt-wearers) were allowed to be present for the actual ritual; the ceremony required the skin of a white (albino) buffalo, considered holy to the Lakota due to their belief that White Buffalo Calf Maiden had brought the Sacred Pipe to their people (Brown 1953). Because of this belief, only a young virgin was allowed to tan the hide of the white buffalo; in return, the young woman was given a dress, belt, leggings, moccasins, and a horse by the owner of the sacred hide, and yet another outfit for her
second day of work (Schneider 1983). These outfits were likely ornamented in a manner that made clear her role in the ceremony. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the tanned white buffalo hide was divided among the White Buffalo Owners, and each man made a headband out of it, to which two eagle feathers were attached. According to Hassrick (1964:267), “These headdresses were the badge of the Wicasas, to be worn only in times of peace and never in war.

The scalp dance, or victory dance, was celebrated by the entire camp after the return of a successful war party. Women were allowed to wear their husband’s or brother’s warrior society regalia and to display his shield. The women sang and danced, honoring the brave exploits of their male kin (Wissler 1912). Some young women would honor those warriors “left on the battlefield” by dancing and displaying his lance or war shield (Standing Bear 1933:220). The returning warriors, each painted in the manner of his particular society, performed reenactments of the recent battle. Headmen’s society officers watched carefully, looking for prospective members. Unmarried young women also attended, wearing their finest clothing, the faces of some painted with vermillion to display their status as buffalo women or Hunkayapi.

The Victory Dance was a very dramatic performance given by the braves who took this opportunity to display strength, bravery, war skill, and to decorate themselves a great deal. Some of them used their favorite war horses in order to give a faithful and dramatic picture of what took place on the battlefield. The animals too, seemed to sense the meaning and the glamour of the occasion and I have seen them prance, snort, and act with their masters in a most marvelous way. The acting in these dances was sometimes very fine- the receiving of a wound, the rescue of a friend, an escape with the assistance of a friend, all being enacted with realism (Standing Bear 1933:220).

The Lakota victory dance was the culmination of a way of life which depended on valor, conquest, and the spoils of war. “The economy, based so heavily on consumption,
could be maintained only by exploitation…war was the fuel” (Hassrick 1964:76). Because of the centrality of warfare in Lakota society, it was necessary to glorify acts of daring and bravery, and the rewards for those men who constantly risked their lives were prestige, status, and social advancement.

The exhibitionism of the individual, like the vanity of his group, proudly expounded the glory of the Sioux. Their basic ethnocentrism sustained a national unity which expressed itself in terms of both personal role and status in the societal pattern as well as in the reputation which the tribe held among their friends and enemies… To court danger and tempt death, to risk self to an extent almost beyond reason, were prerogatives of success. To boast and brag of one’s daring and one’s achievements were the accepted rewards for the successful (Hassrick 1964:76).

3.11 Summary

A century of Lakota expansion and domination had demanded constant risk-seeking and self-aggrandizement by men. The reward for this behavior was prestige and wealth for oneself and one’s family, high social standing, leadership positions, and enhancing the prestige of one’s band and tribe. The prestige of men, women, sons, and daughters was primarily expressed through elaborate displays of self-adornment, the wearing of badges or regalia earned through participation in ceremonies and men’s societies, and the continual redistribution of wealth in the form of prestige goods and horses. Ultimately, each of these three types of displays only served to garner additional prestige, thus further cementing a family’s status.

For women, the production and display of elaborately decorated clothing and accessories, participation in ceremonies, and membership in women’s societies also resulted in prestige for oneself and one’s family. A young woman skilled in the production of beautifully quilled and beaded goods was a credit to her kin group and commanded a high bride price. After marriage, women continued to receive public recognition for the
number and quality of the robes, tipis, and decorated items they produced, and they were often paid for their work. These goods were also redistributed at ceremonies and give-aways, further enhancing the status of women, as well as their families and kin groups.
4.1 Hypothesis 1: Costliness of Signals

The costs associated with the many different types of displays of body decoration and personal adornment described above can be assessed in a number of ways. As noted by Bliege Bird and Smith (2005:236), some signals are intrinsically costly to produce or to maintain, and other signals are “cheap to produce but entail costs through their potential consequences.” It is important to distinguish between these different types of costs, and among the Lakota, prestige signaling involved both types of costs. The production and display of elaborately decorated prestige goods was costly in an economic sense. There is the actual cost of the raw materials and trade goods necessary for the production of items of adornment to consider, as well as opportunity costs: the time spent procuring craft materials, trading for prestige goods, or producing elaborate clothing and headdresses could well have been spent on activities that more directly enhanced an individual’s survival and reproduction. Signaling military prowess was not always costly in terms of time or resources, however; there was virtually no cost involved in painting a cross on one’s horse that signaled having saved a friend’s life in battle, but the act which earned the right to paint the symbol was extremely costly. Of critical importance here is the risk factor; at the heart of the Lakota costly signaling phenomenon was the accumulation of war honors and in earning these, men repeatedly risked their lives.

By far the heaviest cost involved in the signaling of military prowess was the risk faced in warfare, as well as the recklessness and daring required in establishing one’s reputation as a skilled warrior. As discussed by Hassrick (1964:268), “men voluntarily and
willingly risked their lives solely for the recognition which the risk afforded.” This is demonstrated time and time again in the literature pertaining to men’s societies, most notably by the various societies’ sash wearers’, lance bearers’, or bonnet bearers’ habit of staking themselves to the ground on the battlefield. It was very much commonplace for these officers to be killed as a result of their daring. In reference to the *Wic’iska* (White Marked) society, Wissler (1912:34) noted “The office of the bonnet bearers is not often filled, as it is considered very dangerous because the wearers of the bonnet were usually killed or wounded.” Also revealing was the Omaha society’s practice of attaching a bell to a member’s clothing in order to mark the location of each injury received in battle. “This was popular and many wished to be wounded, so that after a few expeditions many of the dancers wore bells” (Wissler 1912:49). The only explanation for this extreme risk taking, to the point that men “wished to be wounded” in exchange for the right to wear a bell, is costly signaling. In the case of risk taking in warfare, the cost aspect is quite clear-cut; however, there were also costs associated with the production of men’s society regalia.

Wissler points out that the feathers, skins, beads, quillwork, paint, metal lance tips, and sinew required to construct the regalia and ceremonial weapons for *akicita* societies were usually solicited from the encampment at large by a number of young group members. They would stand outside the lodges of prestigious men and sing songs, and if inclined, a portion of the needed supplies would be sent out by children. These men of status might also allow their children give away a horse to mark the occasion. The donors of the materials required for regalia production were not necessarily society members, but made the donation because *akicita* societies served an important role in maintaining order in the camp (Hassrick 1964). Food donations were also made during *akicita* initiation rites for
the same reason; of course, these donations also increased the prestige of the wealthy donors. It was expected, however, that new members and newly elected officers give away horses and goods at the initiation ceremonies (Wissler 1912).

The materials needed to produce headman and war society regalia were supplied by prospective members at their own cost. Because the regalia of these upper-level societies tended to be more elaborate, the cost in materials alone was indicative of prestige; for instance, the value of the many eagle feathers that made up a single war bonnet were acquired only at great cost. Eagle trapping was a dangerous venture and involved digging a large pit which was covered with branches and baited with meat. When an eagle landed to get the bait, a man hiding in the pit would grab the eagle by the legs and kill it. This process occasionally went awry, however; the winter count of No Ears describes 1807 as the year that some eagle trappers were killed (Walker 1982). High status men were not obligated to procure their own eagle feathers through this risky process, though, and likely purchased or traded for them; still, they were costly.

Regalia and ceremonial weapons could also be purchased, as noted above with the sash wearers of the Miwatani. The beadwork and quillwork adorning headmen’s society clothing was either purchased from the Double Woman cult or from the Porcupine Quill Workers society, or produced by a female relative. The custom of producing new regalia every year appears to be shared by all societies, indicating that the lances, staffs, sashes, and headdresses were kept by their owners and likely maintained their effectiveness as signals of prestige and military prowess long after the office held was vacated. Standing Bear alludes to this when he notes, "One of my sisters was named Feather Weaver, for my father had many feather decorations. Another sister was named Two Staffs, for father
belonged to two lodges, and each had given him a feather-decorated staff" (1931:156). That Standing Bear’s sisters were named after society regalia is interesting, underlining the importance it played in establishing a man's reputation, as well as hinting at its time consuming nature. As a result of the very high costs, in terms of both the production of regalia as well as risking one’s life, involved in establishing the reputation necessary to gain membership in a men’s society, especially a war or headmen's society, membership (represented by the display of regalia) became an honest or hard-to-fake signal of individual military prowess and prestige.

In addition to proving his prowess in warfare, a man of high status was expected to have established his generosity through holding many giveaways, and his wives and children must have participated in all of the proper ceremonial rites of passage. Both the ceremonies and their associated giveaways required the accumulation and redistribution of enormous amounts of wealth in the form of horses, food, elaborately decorated clothing, accessories, and trade goods. As mentioned, the cost of the beads and porcupine quills with which many objects were decorated, as well as the vast amount of time it took women to produce them, contributed to maintaining their integrity as costly signals. Lower status women did not possess the means to acquire the costly materials required, and likely lacked the free time to devote solely to craft production due to the extra workload of women married monogamously. Likewise, horses were valuable and only a man of means would be able to distribute a large number of them in exchange for prestige. High status males were also advantaged during communal bison hunts due to their faster and better trained buffalo horses and superior arrows, and as a result, they brought in many times more meat and skins than lower class males (Hassrick 1964). A poor or lower class family simply did
not have the disposable wealth to accumulate a significant quantity of the prestige goods, horses, and meat necessary to sponsor the rites of passage, ceremonies, and giveaways that were the basis of accumulating prestige in Lakota society.

Poorer men were also essentially barred from joining *akicita* societies, the only true avenue to status and wealth in Lakota society.

We were told that poor men were never taken in because they had not the means to assist the needy and to make feasts and also because a man who had no personal ambition to rise in the world was not a likely person to carry out the ideals of an organization…It is the ideal that members help both by word and deed the struggling poor man; should he rise, he would be respected but rarely taken into a society, since he did not rise unaided. (Wissler 1912:64).

It was not impossible for a poor man to achieve high status, just unlikely. Of course, under the conditions in which the nineteenth century Lakota lived, with vast bison herds to exploit and wealth in the form of hide trading and horse raiding at one’s disposal, even those with less status had open access to the resources necessary for survival. In addition, it was very unusual for a Lakota family to be truly needy due to the ethic of generosity: the poor were given meat from the hunt, horses and clothing at giveaways, and were generally taken care of. This giving, of course, further served to reinforce the prestige and status of the benefactor.

**4.2 Hypothesis 2: Maintaining Signal Integrity**

There are two aspects to consider when evaluating the honesty of signals. Of primary importance is that costly signals be shown to reliably indicate some hidden trait or characteristic of the signaler (McAndrew 2002). In order to maintain the honesty of signals, then, there must be some mechanism to prevent free-riders from faking signals. First, the manner in which signals were kept honest by nineteenth century Lakota tribes will be
discussed, after which will follow a discussion of what specific hidden qualities were being signaled.

Among the Lakota, signals were kept honest, or hard-to-fake, through strictly socially-enforced mechanisms. These are discussed in first-hand accounts over and over again. In his description of the prestigious *Hunka* ceremony, Walker’s informant Little Wound discussed the consequences of impersonating a *Hunkayapi*.

If you wear this red streak without being entitled to do so, or if you act contrary to what your monitors (*Mihunka*) have taught you, *Tatanka* will inform all men and all women and all animals that you are a sham, and the spirits in medicine will go from them. Disease and hardships will come upon you (Walker 1980:197).

Walker (1980) reiterated that anyone who wore the red stripes of the *Hunkayapi* without having undergone the costly ceremony would have been held in contempt by the tribe.

In terms of military honors, signals were kept honest through the dramatic re-enactment of war stories at tribal gatherings. At these public dances, coups must be sworn to by witnesses who were on the battlefield and saw the act first hand (Hassrick 1964). Also, war scenes were painted on tipis and robes so that everyone in a camp could view them, and in this manner anyone attempting to falsify his war record would have been quickly discovered. Standing Bear pointed out that when a man displayed war honors “he must, of course, be honest in his wearing of them and cannot, for instance, paint his quills red if he had not suffered a wound at the hand of the enemy” (Standing Bear 1931:84-85).

The continual updating and innovating of men’s society regalia also helped to ensure signal integrity. Wissler revealed how the hair shirt of the *Wicasayatanpi* no longer functioned as an honest signal of leadership, status, and prestige when he noted, “in recent times this garment was worn by anyone” (1912:39). The replacing of the bison horn
headdress with the eagle feather bonnet by the Chiefs society could also indicate that an
innovation was required to ensure that their regalia remained an honest signal of prestige:
after the bonnet braves of the Brave Heart society began wearing bison horn headdresses,
the Chiefs society updated their regalia (Wissler 1912).

The penalty for misrepresenting one’s skills and exploits, under certain
circumstances, could be deadly. The Oglala winter count of No Ears chronicles two
separate incidences of *Heyoka* impersonators being killed. The creators of winter counts
painted one event by which each year would be remembered, and the event for the year
1774 translates as, “They killed *Heyoka* impersonator” (Walker 1982:126). Again,
fourteen years later, the event for the year 1788 translates as, “Two *Heyoka* impersonators
were killed” (Walker 1982:128). While capital punishment was socially-sanctioned by
Lakota tribes, it was exceedingly rare, and every attempt was made to avoid this
eventuality. Ella Deloria (1944) discusses how murderers were even sometimes adopted
by the kin group of their victims in order to hold a Lakota band together, thereby avoiding
the cycle of retaliatory killings that would otherwise fission the group. That three *Heyoka*
impersonators were executed within such a relatively short time span reveals the degree to
which Lakota societies demanded honesty from their peers. The *Heyoka* were a powerful
and feared class of shamans, and were believed to be under the power of the *Wakinyan*, or
thunder and lightning spirits (figure 4.1). According to Walker, “Such a one is also
credited with power to get others out of trouble and is permitted to appear as an
intermediary in contention or strife and to bring about a settlement of differences” (cited in
Wissler 1912:84). The killing of the three *Heyoka* impersonators underscores the degree to
which the Lakota were prepared to maintain the integrity of their social order.
Figure 4.1. War Insignia, No. 8. A *Heyoka* Warrior, by Thunder Bear, 1912. Courtesy, History Colorado (Walker Collection, MSS #653, Scan #10041449)
Costly signals must also reliably indicate some hidden trait or characteristic of the signaler. When considering Lakota self-decoration and adornment, a variety of hidden qualities were signaled. Costly signaling of military prowess through the display of societal regalia and war honors allowed individual male group members to communicate a number of hidden attributes including bravery, daring, prestige, wealth, status, leadership potential, and solidarity in warfare. During the eighteenth century, when there were fewer Lakota bands, and each band consisted of less members, it was likely easier to keep track of the war record of individual males. As population boomed and more and more bands split off and formed new groups, however, it would have become more difficult to evaluate each warrior on the basis of his reputation. The heraldic system of war honors, displays of men’s society affiliation, and painting one’s war exploits on tipi covers and robes allowed males to signal their military skills to an ever growing audience of receivers.

Women, too, could signal their prestige, wealth, eligibility, and industriousness through displays of personal adornment. A woman wearing an elaborately decorated dress laden with trade beads, as well as trade jewelry indicated the wealth of her husband or father. The vermillion paint adorning the part in her hair indicated her status as a buffalo woman, and the red stripes painted on her cheeks revealed how many times she had participated in the Hunka ceremony. A glance at her braids indicated whether she was married or not; braids hanging down the back indicated she was unmarried, while braids hanging forward over her shoulders revealed that she was married (Hassrick 1964). An elaborately beaded cradleboard or saddle blanket also served to indicate wealth. A spider design on the back of a woman’s robe, swallow motifs on her clothing, or a war bonnet pouch would indicate that she was a powerful, but dreaded, Double Woman dreamer,
capable of quilling the most exquisite designs. In the absence of costly signaling, few of these hidden qualities would be observable; but, to anyone who understood the Lakota language of adornment, all of these hidden aspects would be immediately understood, even if the woman being observed were a complete stranger.

For men, even more information regarding the hidden qualities of an individual could be ascertained. Upon viewing an unknown Lakota male in full regalia on horseback, for instance, an observer would be able to identify to which men’s society a man belonged, whether he were an officer, and whether he had exhibited his bravery and fortitude by staking himself down on the battlefield. The number and position of his coup feathers would also indicate success in battle. It would be immediately apparent if he had been successful in horse raiding, and even the number of horses captured and what color they were would have been observable. If he had taken more than ten horses, this would be indicated by a miniature moccasin and rope on his belt. From the paintings of his war exploits on his robe and shield, individual acts of valor and even specific battles would have been recognizable. If he had given away a wife to demonstrate his stoicism, this would be indicated by an owl foot suspended from a corner of his robe; multiple wives given away would also be signaled with multiple owl feet.

The amount of quillwork or beadwork on a man’s leggings and moccasins would not only indicate his wealth, but also the degree of esteem to which he was held by his female relatives. Trade jewelry, a peace medal, or hair plates would further indicate his wealth. Sundance scars on his chest would signal his commitment to his tribe and fellow warriors, his ability to bear the pain of this costly ritual scarification, as well as the year of self-sacrifice, giving, and sexual abstention which was required before participating in the
Sundance. Red stripes on his cheek would indicate his status as a *Hunkayapi*, and a white buffalo headband or a hair shirt would indicate his role as a *Wicasayatanpi*, a leader of his tribe. A hair shirt and hair fringed leggings would indicate his status as one of the four leaders of the seven Lakota tribes, a *Wicasayatanpika*, the highest rank in Lakota society. All of this hidden information, in the absence of costly signaling, would have remained unknown.

**4.3 Hypothesis 3: Individual and Societal Benefits of Costly Signaling**

Costly signaling must be beneficial to both the signaler and receiver, resulting in a payoff of enhanced prestige at the level of the individual (Bliege Bird and Smith 2005). Considering the intricate and highly detailed information that was broadcast through body decoration and personal adornment by members of Lakota society, the benefits gained as a result of this costly signaling must have been significant.

In terms of military honors, the signaling of prowess in warfare was a key factor in gaining admittance to a men’s society. To be considered for membership in an *akicita* society, considered the entry-level warrior societies in Lakota culture, men were expected to have "killed enemies and distinguished themselves" (Wissler 1912:17). In order to be considered for membership in a headmen's society, a man must have an extremely impressive number of war honors. If a warrior had served as a lance bearer or sash wearer in a society and had survived being staked down in battle, this would enhance his reputation considerably. According to Wissler’s informant John Blunt Horn, being staked down in battle and surviving guaranteed admittance into the Chiefs society (Wissler 1912). In light of these requirements, it was essential that a man have the ability to display his war record. It was beneficial for the individual warrior because it helped him gain admittance
into a society; this, in turn, was the gateway to membership in headmen’s societies, leadership positions, and prestige. The displays of military prowess were also beneficial to men’s society leaders, as it enabled them to assess each individual’s war record in a straightforward manner, allowing them to better identify prospective members and increase the prestige of their particular society. When it came to selecting leaders at the band level, also under the control of headmen’s societies, being able to accurately gauge the wealth, prestige, and military prowess of prospective council members would also have been advantageous.

Costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment was also beneficial on a social level. Because strict exogamy rules required Lakota males to seek marital partners from other bands and tribes, it would have been necessary for them to display proof of their accomplishments to prospective brides and their kin, who were likely unfamiliar with their war record and social standing. By being able to accurately gauge the wealth, prestige, and military prowess of prospective suitors, the male kin of a marriageable young woman would have been in a better position to select the best offer of marriage.

From the point of view of a man looking for a prospective bride, being able to effectively gauge the wealth, status, and domestic skills of eligible women would also have been beneficial. It might give him an advantage in establishing bride price, or save him time and energy in pursuing a young woman whose bride price would be beyond his means. A man looking for a prospective bride could assess the productivity of marriageable women by viewing the robe and tipi tallies painted on the council lodge. As polygyny became more widespread among the Lakota, and as female labor became more important
in processing the valuable hides that generated wealth in the form of trade goods, obtaining a skilled and industrious wife seems to have become more difficult. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, bride price was paid in skins; however, towards the end of the nineteenth century a number of horses were required to secure a marriage partner (Hassrick 1964; Walker 1982). Likewise, over the course of the nineteenth century, bride capture and the taking of female captives in warfare became more and more common. Increased competition for women appears to have caused costly displays to intensify and become more elaborate over the course of the nineteenth century.

At the level of the Lakota band, costly signaling primarily operated to advertise prestige; however, it also contributed to power negotiations among Lakota tribes, as well as power negotiations on the Great Plains as a whole, which involved many different tribes. This has been referred to as multi-level signaling by Wandsnider (2011), and was also discussed by Roscoe (2009). The notion behind multi-level signaling is that while costly signaling primarily operates as within-group interpersonal competition, the combined effect of this individual signaling simultaneously broadcasts a group-level signal of strength, cooperation, and quality. The group-level signal then becomes critical in determining power relationships within a broader geographical area.

Costly signaling of military prowess through body decoration and personal adornment contributed to intertribal power negotiations, as Lakota tribes competed against each other for important camping spots, hunting areas, trading opportunities, and influential leadership positions. It has already been demonstrated that costly signaling of military prowess was essential in earning the reputation necessary to be considered for leadership opportunities at the band level. Since tribal leadership consisted of a council
made up of the *Wicasa* (band leaders), the four *Wicasayantanpi* (shirt wearers), and the Chiefs society, it was likewise prestige-based. A prominent headman, at this level, would be in competition with other headmen for leadership of his tribe, and as a group, these headmen would be in competition with the leaders of other tribes.

Bray (1994:185) describes the intense nature of intertribal competition among Lakota tribes and their leaders, saying, "tribal polities were competitive, jockeying for preferential access to hunting grounds and both intertribal and interethnic trade." Stable tribes with hereditary leaders, like the Miniconjou, lost group members to aggregative tribes, typified by the Oglala, where leadership opportunities were more readily available, "attracting outside aspirants to status" (Bray 1994:186). Bray characterizes these "aggregate" tribes as "inherently unstable, their politics dangerously volatile" and notes that all four cases of assassinations of Lakota headmen in the nineteenth century occurred in tribes whose population growth was aggregative (1994:186); even so, the military capacity of aggregative tribes exceeded that of stable tribes (Bray 1994).

The role that costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment played in this dynamic and turbulent Lakota intertribal competition was subtle, but important. The prestige and power of every Lakota band, and in turn every Lakota tribe, was measured not only in numbers, but in terms of the status, wealth, and military skills of its members, including how many horses they owned. Each of these qualities, as illustrated, was best and most easily ascertained based on the honest and costly displays of individuals. Because the different bands and tribes often camped together in the winter, as well as congregating in huge numbers for the annual Sundance and bison hunt, the wealth and skills of members of each band and tribe were directly displayed to other Lakota groups.
Here is where the costly signaling phenomenon really operated most effectively; the tipis painted with battle scenes, the elaborately beaded clothing, the red stripes of the *Hunakayapi*, and the dramatic reenactments of valor in battle all found their purpose in communicating the hidden qualities of each band and tribe to the thousands of members of the other Lakota bands and tribes who periodically gathered together. It was on these occasions where costly signals of individual prestige and skill most effectively served their purpose of organizing the broader society and broadcasting social messages.

In addition to operating at the individual, band, and tribal levels, costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment contributed to the overall success of the Lakota nation, especially in regards to military domination. After witnessing the military exploits of the Lakota in 1846, historian Francis Parkman commented, “War is the breath of their nostrils… against most of the neighboring tribes they cherish a rancorous hatred, transmitted from father to son, and inflamed by constant aggression and retaliation” (McGinnis 1990:80). While Lakota tribes competed against each other incessantly, against most of the other tribes on the Plains they presented a united front. Even at this macro-level, costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment was beneficial to both the signaling group and the receiving group. According to Hassrick (1964), even the presence of one famous and highly-renowned warrior was often enough to turn the tide of a battle. Since many of the *akicita* and headmen’s societies had been initially borrowed from other Plains tribes, the societal regalia and the information it communicated was known to enemy tribes as well (Wissler 1912). In this manner the coup feathers, painted symbols, and heraldic achievements of each member of a war party were not only operating to assure solidarity on the side of the Lakota warriors, these costly
signals were simultaneously broadcasting the collective skills and prowess of the Lakota war party to their opponents. This signal broadcasting served to intimidate the enemy and may have also enabled the opponents of the Lakota to retreat and save themselves a costly defeat.

Consider also the practice of inviting enemy tribes to attend the annual Sun Dance; this would have been an excellent opportunity display the strength of the Lakota tribes to other Plains tribes without the risk of casualties. The feasts, ceremonies, and give-aways that accompanied the Sun Dance would have demonstrated the wealth and prestige of high status families and kin groups to a broad audience of receivers; in addition, the costly scarification rites that were endured by the Sun Dancers would have communicated the bravery, endurance, and commitment of Lakota warriors to their enemies in an unmistakably clear manner. While other Plains tribes celebrated some version of the Sun Dance, the Lakota were the only Plains tribe in which the central focus of the Sun Dance was the scarification rite, and they were also the only Plains tribe who suspended their dancers from the central pole, requiring each man participating to tear his pectoral muscles in order to disengage (Spier 1921). It is significant that enemy tribes were invited to attend the annual gathering and witness the Sun Dance, and the Lakota tribes likely benefitted from this opportunity to display their wealth, strength, and numbers to other Plains tribes.

4.3 Summary

Costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment communicated highly detailed information which, in the absence of signaling, would have remained hidden. By displaying society regalia, face and body paint, feathers, elaborately decorated clothing and accessories, and prestige goods, Lakota men, women, and children were able
to broadcast and receive important social messages regarding one’s prestige, status, wealth, skill, leadership potential, commitment to group, and ceremonial participation. This was important in a rapidly expanding and highly mobile population in which it was impossible to know everyone by face, name, reputation, or kin ties.

Signals were kept honest in a number of different ways. The honesty of military signaling was maintained through the dramatic reenactment of battle scenes, coups being sworn to by witnesses, and the painting of battle scenes on robes and tipis. Displays of regalia and body paint to which one was not entitled were met with supernatural punishment, social contempt, and even death. Displays of prestige goods and elaborate clothing were kept honest due to their costs: only those who were able to bear these costs in terms of time, labor, and materials could transmit the signal. The use of increasingly costly goods and materials over time also served to maintain the honesty of signals.

The costs of displaying society regalia, decorated clothing, paints, and prestige trade goods can be assessed in different ways. The economic costs of *akicita* regalia production were borne by the societies themselves, as well as wealthy members of each society’s band. The benefit received for this benefaction was an orderly camp and prestige at the band level. This translated into tribal leadership positions, more prestigious campsites, and better trading opportunities. The costs of coup feathers, paints, and war and headmen’s society regalia were paid by individuals, their wives, their families, and their kin groups. The benefits to individuals and their immediate family were prestige, better marriage opportunities, and ritual participation which garnered preferential treatment. The benefits to one’s kin group are more difficult to ascertain. While kin support was essential, especially in terms of sponsoring feasts and give-aways, the benefits received by kin for
their support is less clear. It is probable that kin group members benefitted in terms of being nominated for membership in prestigious societies, marrying polygynously, or receiving reciprocal treatment when they conducted their own feasts and give-aways.

Coup feathers and military regalia were costly in terms of the time, labor, and materials needed to produce the specific items displayed, but were also extremely costly in terms of risk of life. This is especially true for the *akicita* bonnet bearers, lance bearers, and sash wearers who pledged to stake themselves down in battle until released by a fellow member, as well as members of war societies like the Dogs who agreed to never retreat in battle. The costs of this level of bravery were exceedingly high for these individuals as well as their wives and families due to the high probability of death, but the rewards were also outstanding, including fame, glory, prestige, and membership in a headmen’s society.

While the costs of signaling through body decoration, personal adornment, and military heraldry were paid at the individual level, they were also paid at the level of the kin group, band, and tribe; likewise, the benefits and rewards of this social signaling were reaped at the individual, kin group, band, and tribal level. This dynamic multi-level signaling phenomenon developed rapidly due to a number of interacting factors including the shift to nomadic equestrianism, introduction to a market economy via the fur trade, and unprecedented growth and expansion. It resulted in a flexible but cohesive population who could aggregate in the thousands in massive but well-organized camps or disperse into small family groups at will. The Lakota, despite a very loosely organized tribal leadership structure, were able to militarily dominate the Plains, continually expand their territory, control access to bison herds and the lucrative fur trade, call up thousands of mounted warriors at a moment’s notice, and even challenge the U.S. army. This success was due, in
part, to the social organizing mechanism of multi-level costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

The need for a systematic, empirical, and theoretically-guided anthropological refocusing on the arts, personal adornment, and self-decoration was discussed at the outset. Dissanayake (1980, 1982, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2007), since the 1980s, has been arguing that an ethological and evolutionary approach is optimal, and in the past decade her solo has become a chorus. Evolutionary psychologists, archaeologists, and art historians have been joined by experts interested in neurocognitive and biological approaches to human behavior in attempting to answer a few basic questions related to creativity, art production, and human evolution. This research, summarized in the simplest possible language, asks the fundamental questions, “Why do humans everywhere feel the need to create art or decorate themselves?” and “What does art do in small-scale societies?” For the most part, mainstream anthropology has been conspicuously absent in addressing these important questions. Recently, however, human behavioral ecologists and evolutionary anthropologists focusing on costly signaling theory have been generating explanations which show promise for addressing the evolution and function of art and self-decoration in human societies. These “plausibility arguments” need to be tested against ethnographic data in order to better understand the specific costs and benefits associated with signaling through body decoration and personal adornment, as well as the social mechanisms which allow a signaling system to function effectively (Bliege Bird and Smith 2005:225). This study sought to accomplish this goal.

Anthropological inquiry into the socio-cultural function of art, adornment, and self-decoration has focused on its ability to communicate social messages and serve as
status markers. Firth (1951) argued that art allowed kin groups to enhance and maintain their status and supported the position of chiefs and high ranking men. Bourdieu (1977) and Benedict (1931) believed that the function of art is to mark social distinctions while Ember and Ember (2011), along similar lines, discuss self-decoration as a means to delineate rank or social position as well as communicate information regarding ethnic identity or religious affiliation. Roach and Eicher (1979) concur that personal adornment defines social roles and indicates economic status, while also reinforcing beliefs, customs, and values and Wobst (1977) comments on the ability of artistic styles to communicate information regarding group affiliation across regions, while also defining one’s social position within groups.

There seems to be a general consensus that art, adornment, and body decoration effectively communicate information regarding the position of individuals and groups within societies. Maybe this answers the question, “What does art do in small-scale societies?” originally posed by Firth over sixty years ago; then again, perhaps not. These explanations leave entirely too many critical questions unaddressed, especially in terms of the motives of individuals. Why is it necessary to broadcast one’s social position through displays of adornment? How do displays of art and self-decoration organize a broader society or support the position of high ranking men? Who benefits from these displays of self-decoration and how? How do kin groups enhance their status through displays of art and adornment? Why don’t lower status individuals just fake higher status displays of self-adornment? It is not sufficient to say that art and self-decoration communicate social information; it then becomes necessary to work out the mechanics of how art and self-decoration communicate information, who it communicates information to, and for
what purpose. Reframing the discussion of the function of art and adornment through the lens of costly signaling theory has allowed for these additional questions to be addressed; specifically, it has allowed for an examination of the motives of signalers, the costs associated with producing displays, the precise information being communicated, the mechanism by which prestige and status is conferred, the ways in which free-riders are prevented from faking signals, and the benefits to signalers, receivers, and the group. In this regard, costly signaling theory has proven its utility in understanding how displays of art and adornment contribute to structuring social relationships at the level of the individual and the group, illustrating the efficacy of an evolutionary perspective in answering the question, “What does art, personal adornment, and body decoration do in small-scale societies?”

Costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment by Lakota males constituted an intricate symbolic language which communicated a great deal of hidden information about the signaler to a broad audience of receivers. The elaborate regalia displayed by men gave the observer ample and detailed personal information regarding his bravery and daring, skill in warfare, status, wealth, prestige, and leadership potential. This was important in rapidly growing tribal populations in which it was impossible to know everyone by face, name, or reputation. Exogamy rules and increasing levels of polygyny demanded that males signal their skills in order to differentiate themselves from other males when attempting to forge alliances through advantageous marriages. Costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment by Lakota females likewise communicated hidden information regarding a woman’s status, kin group wealth and prestige, industriousness, and domestic skills.
Signaling through body decoration and personal adornment in Lakota society was found to be costly, honest, and beneficial to the signaler and to the receiver. Benefits for the signaler involved prestigious membership in *akicita*, war, and headmen's societies, leadership opportunities, and marital opportunities, and many of these benefits extended to the signaler’s extended family and kin group. Benefits to the receiver came in the form of assurance of solidarity in warfare, as well as the ability to accurately gauge the military prowess, wealth, prestige, leadership skills, and in regards to women, domestic skills, of the signaler in order to more effectively manage social negotiations. Beyond the level of the individual, costly signaling through body decoration and personal adornment contributed to the cohesion and unity of the seven Lakota tribes, enabling an orderly seasonal aggregation of extremely large groups and enhancing military cooperation and success.

Roscoe (2009) discussed how humans in small-scale societies utilize social signaling in order to avoid or reduce violence caused by competition for mates and resources; for the Lakota, this was certainly the case. At the level of the individual, on a within-group basis, costly displays were of a competitive nature, allowing men and women to signal their differential levels of prestige and skill to an audience of their peers. Because signals were kept costly or hard-to-fake, the receivers were in a better position to evaluate whether or not to form alliances (marriages, social partnerships, war parties) with the signaler, or to avoid them altogether. In this sense, costly signaling organized Lakota society into a loosely structured prestige hierarchy which served to alleviate social tension. Furthermore, on a between-group basis, the collective expression of individual signals broadcast a group signal of prestige, military effectiveness, strength, and cooperation to
fellow bands and tribes, becoming a critical factor in establishing the relative strength and
power of competing Lakota groups, which ultimately needed to function as a cooperating
whole. By organizing and ranking these competing Lakota bands and tribes, group-level
signaling also served to avoid or reduce the tension and potential violence caused by
competition for political power, prestige, and access to resources. In this respect, as noted
by Roscoe (2009:100), social signaling can be a key factor in “creating” social
organization.

This friction between within-group interpersonal competition and group-level
cooperation also has implications for understanding inequality and the emergence of
hierarchies. According to Roscoe (2009:103), this conflict of interest is

inherent in the way a social signaling system structures its internal
relationships, whether among its component subgroups or its individual
members. On the one hand, the system creates a dominance hierarchy that
generates antagonism: those individuals and subgroups who prove
themselves the strongest of the strong get to advance their interests over
others, while those who demonstrate inferior strength—followers—are
obligated to defer. On the other hand, the system creates a moral hierarchy
that generates approval: those individuals and subgroups who contribute
most to the military strength of their groups are esteemed by co-members
because, by their actions, they advance the capacity of these groups to
prevail in competition with others.


In the case of the nineteenth century Lakota, as well as in Roscoe’s examination of
signaling in contact-era New Guinea, inequality is tolerated because, as uncomfortable as it
is on an interpersonal level, the payoff at the level of the group in terms of survival, success,
or expansion compensates for the loss of egalitarianism. As Roscoe quips:

Followers are obliged to console themselves with the thought that: “Well, he’s a real S.O.B., but at least he’s our S.O.B. (2009:103, author’s emphasis).
Along these same lines, Cronk (2005:612) noted that signaling becomes relevant in circumstances in which there are “broad conflicts of interests between categories of signalers and receivers but confluences of interest- common interests that are real though they may be fleeting- between particular signalers and particular receivers.” In the costly signaling model of Lakota self-decoration developed here, the primary conflict of interest is social competition. By deferring to a social competitor, status was conferred on the adversary. The confluence of interest motivating this conferring of status is enhanced prestige and power at the level of the group, which indirectly benefits the individual who deferred, as well as his family and kin group. This should not be confused with an altruistic Wynne-Edwards notion of group selection, however; the deference paid to leaders, elite warriors, and high status men and women was entirely self-motivated, and the payoff for the individual was membership in a prestigious, militarily strong, and competitive band or tribe.

The costly signaling model of body decoration and personal adornment developed here has revealed Lakota society to be more internally differentiated than has been broadly understood, and much more socially complex than a typical nomadic, egalitarian, hunter-gatherer society. After transitioning from band level to tribal organization relatively quickly, the Lakota tribes appear to have been on the verge of developing into full-fledged chiefdoms, complete with hereditary leadership, pot-latching as a means of wealth redistribution, and low social mobility; furthermore, the speed at which this transition took place, scarcely more than a hundred years, is instructive and has connotations for archaeologists and other researchers interested in the ways in which technological innovations and subsistence transitions affect social organization, inequality,
and complexity. In this regard, the costly signaling model developed here is very similar to Boone’s (1998) costly signaling explanation of pot-latching and ritual participation in the Pacific Northwest, as well as Roscoe’s (2009) costly signaling explanation of conspicuous distribution, conspicuous performance, and conspicuous construction in contact-era New Guinea. These studies pointed to the social importance and adaptive significance of seemingly wasteful or irrational behaviors including feasting, dancing, and ritual participation; now, personal adornment and body decoration can be added to this list.

Based on the costly signaling model developed here, it is possible to make predictions regarding the conditions under which a similar phenomenon is likely to manifest. Social signaling through body decoration and personal adornment became increasingly important for the Lakota due to the population expansion and wealth accumulation that resulted from a subsistence transition. Because they were a nomadic society, though, Lakota prestige goods needed to be easily transported. This explains the emphasis on items that could be worn, as well as the practice of decorating horses and tipis. In a sedentary society, costly signaling through art would be more apt to occur in the form of pottery, monumental architecture, and the construction of increasingly elaborate dwellings or clan houses. Costly signaling through self-decoration, on the other hand, would be more likely to be found among pastoralist and nomadic complex hunter-gatherer societies with a tribal social organization who are experiencing wealth accumulation and population expansion as a result of some technological innovation or subsistence transition, and who engage in high levels of warfare.

Further research will need to explore the costs and benefits of multi-level signaling in order to more fully understand how displays of men’s society regalia, body and face
paint, ritual scars, and other forms of self-decoration affected intertribal power negotiations on the Plains. Ethnographic data reviewed in this study suggests that displays of regalia played a significant role in intertribal warfare, either as costly signals of military strength and cooperation or as group markers. Intertribal political dynamics on the Plains during the nineteenth century were well-documented and an enormous amount of literature exists on the subject; this facet of the Lakota signaling phenomenon deserves more attention, but was beyond the scope of the present study.

Another limitation of this study was the heavy reliance on Wissler’s Oglala men’s society data. While a few other ethnographic sources were used, upon careful examination these sources too seemed to rely almost entirely on Wissler’s publication, Societies and Ceremonial Associations in the Oglala Division of the Teton-Dakota (1912). James Walker’s (1980, 1982) publications edited by DeMallie likewise relied on the same Oglala participant interviews used by Wissler. Further research needs to be conducted which utilizes a wider variety of unpublished historic interview sources, preferably from other Lakota tribes, in order to corroborate the Wissler/Walker data and to discover whether men’s societies in other tribes operated in a manner similar to the Oglala societies. It would also be fascinating to access the original Oglala interview texts collected by Walker and published by Wissler in order to discover if there is additional information addressing Lakota regalia and self-decoration that was not published in Wissler’s original report.

This study would also have been strengthened by a more concrete demonstration of the degree to which displays of military prowess and prestige by Lakota men enhanced their reproductive success and inclusive fitness. This relationship is suggested due to the fact that men who excelled in warfare were much more likely to be nominated for
membership in headmen’s societies, secure leadership positions, and achieve higher status; however, these are proximate benefits. It would be preferable to illustrate the benefits of costly signaling in terms of differential reproductive success for the signaler, as well as higher inclusive fitness for the signaler due to the passing of social benefits to kin group members.

Anecdotal evidence was presented indicating that only higher status Lakota men were able to marry polygynously; for instance, Hassrick (1964:120) noted that “it was common knowledge that only the wealthy could afford more than one wife” and Powers (1975:194) also commented that “polygynous marriages were usually reserved for chiefs, that is, men of means.” Biographical accounts of high-profile nineteenth century Lakota chiefs also confirm that men of status usually married polygynously. According to Bettelyoun Bordeaux and Waggoner (1998), Sicangu chief Spotted Tail had four wives, while Oglala shirt-wearer Crazy Horse had two wives. Hunkpapa chief Sitting Bull had five wives, although two died while they were relatively young (Utley 1993). This evidence points to higher reproductive success for high status Lakota men, but the relationship between cultural success, polygynous marriage, and reproductive success needs to be examined in greater detail.

Chagnon (1988) illustrated that elite Yanomamö warriors, or unokais, had higher reproductive success than non-unokais due to their greater success in finding mates, either by abducting wives or simply being more attractive partners in conventional, arranged marriages.

In short, military achievements are valued and associated with high esteem, as they are in many cultures, including our own. Until recently in human history, successful warriors were traditionally rewarded with public offices and political power which, in turn, was used for reproductive advantage.
Among the Yanomamö, non-unokais might be willing to concede more reproductive opportunities to unokais in exchange for a life with fewer mortal risks and fewer reproductive advantages (Chagnon 1988:990).

This relationship between skill in warfare and reproductive success appears to apply to the Lakota as well, but ideally, it needs to be quantified, as demonstrated by the Chagnon study. This would not be impossible, though, as Lakota tribal censuses were conducted periodically throughout the pre-reservation and early reservation period. These tribal rolls could be accessed in order to document the higher reproductive success, as well as the higher inclusive fitness, of elite Lakota warriors and headmen. While a study of this sort would need to be very carefully designed, if successful, it would contribute to the body of literature linking cultural success with reproductive success originally sparked by Irons’ (1979) seminal article and quantified by Borgerhoff Mulder (1988) among the Kipsigis, by Cronk (1991) among the Mukogodo, and a number of other societies as well (see Smith 2004 for a review of the link between hunting success and reproductive success in five contemporary foraging societies).

Art production and personal adornment are uniquely human endeavors and all societies engage in some sort of artistic behavior. From an evolutionary perspective, this behavior is difficult to account for because time, energy, and resources that could have been directed to meeting the survival needs of one’s self, family, and kin group are instead diverted to an activity that seems to have no purpose. This study developed an ethnographically-based costly signaling model of personal adornment and body decoration which showed how these seemingly illogical expenditures of time, energy, and resources are instead beneficial, serving important social functions. By illustrating the multitude of ways in which displays of artistic elaboration and self-decoration affect social negotiations
in a specific ethnohistoric context, benefitting both individuals and groups, it is hoped that future research will begin to utilize signaling theory to focus on the role played by art and adornment in small-scale societies.
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