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Review of *Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe* By Robin Ridington and Dennis Hastings

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Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe. By Robin Ridington and Dennis Hastings. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Illustrations, foreword, epilogue, bibliography, index. xxvii + 259 pp. \$50.00.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Omahas occupied a strategic position on the Missouri River and served as important middle men in the rapidly expanding fur trade. By mid-century, however, epidemics and white incursions having devastated their way of life, they were confined to a small reservation in northeastern Nebraska. As with other tribes, their culture came under continuous assault by missionaries, agents, and reformers who wished to accelerate their assimilation into mainstream American society.

In the face of these unwelcome changes, tribal elder Yellow Smoke worried that he would not be able to maintain his role as Keeper of the Sacred Pole or be able to pass the object and its knowledge along to a worthy successor. This sacred symbol, which tribal members reverently spoke of as *Umon'hon'ti*, or the Venerable Man, had long represented a living being who had unified and protected the Omaha people. Yet no other tribal member by this time cared to learn the rituals associated with the Sacred Pole or take on the awesome responsibilities associated with its care. Thus, anthropologist Alice Fletcher and tribal member Francis LaFlesche either pressured the elderly keeper to relinquish the object or confiscated it in his absence. For the next hundred years, the Venerable Man and other spiritual objects languished in the collections of Harvard University's Peabody Museum, separated from the people they once had nourished.

This multifaceted book—combining anthropology, oral tradition, and current events—dramatizes the importance of sacred objects among a particular group of Native Americans who have remained linked by them through more than a dozen generations. In the hands of accomplished anthropologist Robin Ridington and tribal historian Dennis

Hastings, their well-crafted study details the richness of Omaha traditional ways, as well as the cultural changes produced during the nineteenth century. Where possible, the text draws upon tribal members' testimonies and represents the best ethnographic study published about the Omahas since 1911.

Blessing for a Long Time, moreover, provides a model of success for other tribes struggling for the return of their own sacred artifacts, funerary items, and skeletal materials currently housed in a host of academic and private collections. Omaha persistence, buttressed by the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act's legal mandate, offers hope for even the smallest of tribes seeking the restoration of their full cultural legacy.

When the Sacred Pole, White Buffalo Robe, Pipe, and other spiritual objects were reunited with their people between 1989 and 1991, the honoring events generated not only a respectful mood but a joyous hope for the future. With their protector again among them, the Omahas foresee an era of tribal unity, rededication of the collective spirit, and cultural revivalism absent for almost a century. No one could wish them any less a blessing.

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