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Book Review: Blackfoot Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitsitapi

Patricia A. McCormack
University of Alberta

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Blackfoot Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitstapi. By Betty Bastien. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2004. xx + 235 pp. Photographs, illustrations, glossaries, bibliography. \$34.95 paper.

Betty Bastien's ambitious goal is no less than the decolonization of Blackfoot ways of knowing as a vehicle to regaining independence, promoting personal and cultural healing, and providing a basis for a new educational system. It is a "transformational pedagogy" that she has undertaken, employing traditional methods of teaching that involve looking inwardly and using personal experience as a primary source of knowledge. She has worked closely in this project with a small number of elders or "grandparents," men and women who are ceremonial specialists and fluent in the Blackfoot language. Her primary audiences are fellow *Siksikaitstapi*—Blackfoot-speakers—and other *Nütsitaipi*—Aboriginal people—but she also reaches out to a non-Aboriginal public.

Blackfoot terms are used extensively to convey cultural values difficult to translate precisely into English, although this makes the book less accessible to non-Blackfoot speakers. The dedicated reader will consult the volume's extensive glossaries, developed with the assistance of Duane Mistaken Chief.

Bastien's analysis posits the existence of unseen spiritual energies that manifest themselves in

physical form and are responsible for the creation of the visible world. Human beings are spiritually connected to this broader cosmic energy and responsible for maintaining and renewing the consequent reciprocal relationships, or alliances, in order for balance to exist in the world. Knowledge is generated by the process of renewing these relationships, which are mediated by ceremonialists during the ceremonies and transfers of sacred medicine bundles.

These relationships began to deteriorate when Blackfoots became involved with the European economy. She calls the "reservation era" a time of outright genocide, an attempt "to alter the identity, the self, and the sense of humanity of the colonized," replacing Blackfoot ways of knowing with "Eurocentred" ones. Many people lost the ability to speak or understand the Blackfoot language, and Blackfoot ceremonial practices were discouraged and even outlawed.

Blackfoot people took steps to decolonize their communities in the late twentieth century. Key to this process has been their attempt to reconstruct their own traditions by recreating alliances with cosmic energies. Prayer, or a sacred way of speaking, is important as "the path for good relations among one's alliances. . . ." Beyond prayer, there is the practice of observing appropriate protocols, listening to traditional stories, speaking the Blackfoot language, and participating in Blackfoot ceremonies.

The process and methodology are therefore experiential. Even if knowledge has been given or "transferred" to an individual, personal understanding of that knowledge is a product of the person's own efforts to understand his or her responsibilities vis-à-vis the broader alliances. The Blackfoot emphasis on firsthand experience provides the vehicle by which former traditions become modern ones.

Bastien has done a good job in capturing the complex issues that concern many Blackfoot elders who are striving to live by means of traditional teachings and fulfilling the responsibilities that come with having a "good heart." The elders guiding Bastien have been actively involved in recovering medicine bundles from

museum repositories and placing them again into ceremonial use. They are also implementing a Blackfoot-controlled education system.

While her primary reliance is on oral teachings, Bastien does draw upon some books written by non-Blackfoot authors, though the bibliography of Blackfoot sources is thin. For instance, she uses the new edition of Clark Wissler and D. C. Duvall's *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians*, edited by Alice Kehoe (1995), but not the monographs by Wissler published by the American Museum of Natural History. The growing literature about Blackfoot history on both sides of the 49th parallel is largely overlooked, and there is some reliance on secondary sources even when primary ones are easily available.

This book will be of great interest to Aboriginal people who are seeking to recreate a traditional way of knowing in a contemporary world. It will also interest academics seeking to understand Aboriginal philosophies, cultural revitalization and redefinition, personality development, and cross-cultural pedagogy.

PATRICIA A. MCCORMACK
School of Native Studies
University of Alberta