

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Wisdom of the Elders: Native Traditions on the Northwest Coast. By Ruth Kirk

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6nt459dn>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 11(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Friesen, John W.

Publication Date

1987-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

as well as the five to six thousand Yaquis living in the United States communities of Old Pascua, 39th Street, and Pascua Pueblo in Tucson, and the community of Guadalupe near Phoenix. A reference section on Yaqui orthography, a map of communities, plus notes and references to earlier works provide an elegant blend of poetics and traditional scholarship. Ethnomusicologists will be happy to know that a cassette of Yaqui songs accompanies the texts.

As the authors state, it is through song that Yaquis believe that all things communicate through a dialogue of sound created between the deer, other members of the wilderness, and the deer singers themselves. Indeed, the book contributes to a better understanding of Yaquis by themselves and others through the rituals of the Deer dance and Deer singing,, which themselves have become an unequivocal symbol of Yaqui identity in the twentieth century.

William K. Powers
Rutgers University

Wisdom of the Elders: Native Traditions on the Northwest Coast. By Ruth Kirk. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, in association with the British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1986. 256pp. including index.

One of the intriguing developments in Native communities today is the resurgence of the traditional role of elder—the influencers of Native society. To the casual observer, it is not immediately apparent what the nature of that functioning was in the height of the culture (or even today), and so one looks forward with anticipation to what this volume may offer. The title seems to suggest that information about the status and role of eldership might be forthcoming.

The anticipation of learning about eldership is further whetted in the preface where the nature of the book's content is implied by the statement that "we no longer can hear the voices of many elders except in memory . . ." and by the title of chapter one which is, "Today's Elders." Basically the chapter reviews elements of Indian history, apparently from the perspective of

elders who were interviewed in preparation for the book. In essence only excerpts from the interviews are included, the bulk of the chapter content comprising descriptive information about the culture of Northwest coastal Indians. Three tribes are specifically targetted: the Nuu-chah-nulth, the Southern Kwakiutl, and the Nuxalk.

The Wisdom of the Elders is divided into three main divisions, the first of which comprises only one chapter. The other two sections each have four chapters and deal with a description of traditional coastal culture and the challenge of cultural transition respectively. Cultural elements treated in the discussion include kinship, rank and privilege, ceremonies and religion, daily life and intertribal relations. Some fascinating insights are revealed in this section, for example, an explanation about song "ownership," which explains that the songs derive from a variety of sources—the potlatch, lullaby songs, prayer songs, funeral songs, etc. In addition, brief elucidations about a variety of other cultural specialties are jammed into this section. These include: a description of the Nuxalk Universe, an old man's advice to his grandson, the story of Johnny Moon's Totem Pole, an explanation of the significance of chiefs' names, the purpose of puberty seclusion, the nature and function of social clubs, why salmon bones are returned to the river and how illnesses are cured. To those somewhat familiar with traditional Indian ways, however, there are few new insights in the discussion. Still, the specificity of presentation is justifiable because Indian cultures *do* feature varying customs and beliefs, and the coastal people are no exception. A case in point is the Northwest Coast Indian people's use of chief's names. In that culture, the names of chiefs are closely linked with regalia, songs and dances, each embodying the cumulative honour of whoever held the name. We are told that history was "built not around individuals, but around names" (p. 55).

The third and final section offers an analysis of developments which have transformed Native cultures from the past to the present. The discussion covers aspects of traditional life, e.g. memories of sea otter hunting, initial contact with foreigners, the fur trade, etc. Two cultural features identified as significant in terms of maintaining ties with the old are art and language. The prose flows freely from one topic to another though it is not always clear which of the contents may be directly attributed to

elders' input. The final chapter, entitled, "Today and Tomorrow" includes brief quotations from a dozen Native spokespersons, only one of whom is identified as an elder. The other three chapters in this section have a similar format with only isolated direct quotations from elders. It would be difficult to determine if the quotations are intended to set the tone of the discussion or if they are merely utilized to lend credibility to the discussion.

This book features a wide variety of eye-catching characteristics, including photographs, both black-and-white and color. The latter are particularly beautiful, for example those of the Kwakiutl artifacts on pp. 90-91 and pp. 186-187. Many of the photographs in the book are by the author. Of special interest are the vignettes of Native life briefly described in specially designated sections of the book via different colored paper. They draw attention by their intriguing titles but do not deter from the body of the text. An index is provided as well as a short bibliography.

Wisdom of the Elders is a timely and well-written book, a little disappointing in terms of its delivery of the elders' wisdom, but well rewarding as a sourcebook on northwest coast Indian cultures. We shall await with anticipation the appearance of further information about the structure and functioning of Native elder-ship from other avenues.

John W. Friesen
University of Calgary

Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation. Edited with an Introduction by Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987. 243 p. \$17.95.

This slim but ambitious volume is the product of a 1982 symposium held in Bismarck, North Dakota. "American Indian Religion in the Dakotas: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," a title which if retained would preclude the need to chide publishers for using unacceptable terminology because of a belief that "Sioux" books sell better. For 15 years, Indians have been trying consciously to replace "Sioux" with the more acceptable Lakota/Dakota. Even though oldtimers when speaking English still use it, and legally many tribal councils are designated