

Wedding Clothes and the Osage Community: A Giving Heritage (Swan and Cooley)

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Abstract

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Keywords

cultural anthropology; material culture; wedding dress | Osage Nation; Oklahoma; Great Plains; North America.

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One must not be misled by the title of *Wedding Clothes and the Osage Community: A Giving Heritage*, as Daniel C. Swan and Jim Cooley richly craft together history, practice, and the nuances of kinship making by using the materiality of wedding clothes as the entry point. They move the reader along a historical timeline to consider gift exchange practices within marriage and ceremonial dances as part of thriving social process in Osage society. While the first two chapters set up the methodological orientation to this work, they strategically present both expert and novice readers with the complexities of marriage ceremonies and kinship making in Osage culture from the 1800s to the present as they theorize materiality through gift exchange and moral values. From the clear presentation of the social values of bride wealth to patrilocal patterns of patrimonial residence, one's emotions are sure to swell with frustration reading the brutal realities of American settler colonialism and the violence inflicted upon the Osage peoples and their traditions. Violence and oppression that saw the cessation of Mízhìⁿ weddings and its social traditions in the 1930s (p. 129). Swan and Cooley present one of the most comprehensive syntheses of Osage history and kinship relations yet published (alongside that of Garrick Bailey's work in the 1990s, of course) while bringing into focus (and critique) the central work of Omaha ethnologist Francis La Flesche and the perspectives of early-European and settler observers such as those of historian Paul Vissier's, whose armchair work from 1827 is based on only knowing Osage social values from meeting with a small delegation of Osage citizens who went to Paris that same year (p. 23).

Because of this cessation of Mízhìⁿ weddings, Swan and Cooley pick up on the way gift exchange continues as a social practice in Osage society shifting from one ceremonial practice to another. Chapters 3 and 4 take the reader from Mízhìⁿ wedding ceremonies to focus upon Iloⁿshka—ceremonial dances akin to the Plains tradition of the Grass Dance, which also prioritizes gift exchange. The organization of the book in this manner is logically chronological, but also poetic, as this design leads the reader to be more prepared for Chapter 5, which is an in-depth consideration of Osage social

values situated around concepts such as order, accumulation, motion, and a return to the gift exchange focus that links the ceremonies and ceremonial dress of Mízhíⁿ weddings and Iloⁿshka together in the present survivance of culture and tradition among the Osage people. The book is rounded out with an Appendix, “Gift Exchange and the Reproduction of Osage Society,” which is itself a stand-alone piece for readers interested in a more anthropological conversations on material culture theory. This novel step of using an Appendix in this manner certainly frees up the monograph to center on the voices of Osage citizens and shows the active way in which Swan and Cooley are conscious of the historical overanalysis of Indigenous communities by white scholars.

There are several strengths to this book. One is that it models for all scholars the power of transparency. Transparency not only in the way Swan and Cooley undertook a community-based research methodology that engaged Osage citizens through gatherings in museums for photographic elicitation and solicitation where individuals could comment on archival images both at in person events and through their digital portal that was wisely created to be interactive so as to increase accessibility. But also, transparency, in the way that the authors never reduce Osage traditions to comparison with other Indigenous groups. This is a welcome reality throughout the book. Added to this, the care with which they take to unpack the logic of linguistic specificity they used, again, assures transparency not only in how they did their work but in how it is presented in the book. This is supported by a carefully crafted glossary for readers to access at the back of the book. But also, in the respected words in the Foreword by Principal Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear of the Osage Nation and the collaboration Swan and Cooley had with Osage citizens such as Romaine Shackelford whose own work informed the accuracy of their interpretations (p. 5).

Moving from strength to strength, Swan and Cooley are active in remedying erasure of Indigenous voices of experience and de-centering white-centric lens that for too long have center men’s voices on women’s experiences in the ethnographic record. A welcome and conscious action that Swan and Cooley have done with consistency especially when it comes to the voices of women whose experiences with marriage is their lived reality (p. 28). The voices of Osage citizens such as Myrtle Unap and Rose Albert Hill, to name just two, give voice to the erasure of women’s experiences in marriage in a moment in time from the 1920s–1930s when love marriages were becoming more common and women who had come of age according to Osage practices were expected to enter arranged Mízhíⁿ marriage.

The balance of text and image is so carefully considered in the design of this work that it is yet another strength. From archival photographs of ceremonies, studio portraiture from late-1800s to early-1900s, to colonial paintings of Osage citizens by white artists, and ledger drawings by Osage citizens themselves. The rich visual dimension to this book extends their work beyond material culture studies and museum studies to be read alongside the significant contemporary work underway on wedding ceremonies through fashion studies, gender and women’s, studies (and I gesture here at the work of feminist scholar Ilya Parkins on wedding clothes in queer contexts [2021]). Clothes and ceremony bring us to new understandings of the nuances of the social, political, and economic realities of kinship in the present, and in particular marriage across cultures where this book adds significantly to this discourse.

Wedding Clothes and the Osage Community speaks to multiple audiences from those interested in material culture (beyond wedding clothes to understand gifts of blan-

kets, broadcloth, food, and animals), religion, and complex social relations within Indigenous communities living under the pressures of American colonialism. The collaborative methodologies modeled in the work of Swan and Cooley adds to growing body of work and can be viewed as a fine example of respectful community-engaged research. And no reader will want to miss the endnotes to each chapter as they are themselves filled with incredible knowledge. Swan and Cooley set a new standard in the Material Vernacular series edited by Jason Baird Jackson with Indiana University Press for their clear prose, rich interpretations of Osage society, and for remedying the ethnographic record by centering the voices of women in understanding experiences of kinship making through the fabric, wearing blankets, hats, finger-woven sashes, and ribbon work of Osage Mízhìⁿ wedding clothes and Iloⁿshka ceremonial dances.

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Ilya Parkins. 2021. "Redressing Weddings: Clothing and LGBTQ+ and Feminist Marriers." <https://redressingweddings.com/>

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