**Lee Staples The Role of Women**

One of the greatest changes in America during the last century has been how women are viewed by the dominant culture.  The feminist movement has made great strides in achieving greater equality for women.  But many Americans don’t realize there are some cultures where women were always treated as powerful members of the community.

Recently, the question was raised about whether it was culturally appropriate for Indian women to sing at the drums at the Mille Lacs Band’s Grand Celebration Powwow in Hinckley and the Annual Powwow near Onamia.  The Elders of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe – both men and women – decided that it was not appropriate, because it conflicted with our teachings.  Men were given the role to sing at these drums, and women have an equally or even more powerful role as Ogichi da qweg (the closest English translation for this is probably “warrior women”).  In this role, the women represent Manidoog (spirits or higher powers).

In our society, the women have always been the decision makers, and their input has always been the key to the survival of our ceremonies.  The Elders felt that allowing women to sing at the drums could eventually affect what goes on within the ceremonies.  The Elders stressed the importance of following the original teachings, because any deviation today could someday be misinterpreted as part of the original instructions on how to conduct the ceremonies.

For the women to abandon their role as Ogichi da qweg and decide they want to sing at the drum ceremonies would be considered an insult to the powers they currently represent.  The women would be saying they find those powers inadequate.

This decision not to allow women to sing at the drums was viewed by some as disrespectful toward women.  That is not true.  Our traditions have always taught us that women are very powerful.

For example, when a girl became a woman, she was taken to a wigwam separate from her family’s dwelling to fast.  There she was taught our traditions that apply to women.  She was not separated from her family out of contempt, or because anyone believed her to be unclean.  She was separated because this change is a time when women are especially powerful, and it is an opportunity to teach women how to handle this power respectfully.

At this time in her life, a woman was taught not to step over sacred items such as the pipe, because her power would nullify the effectiveness of these items.  She was also taught not to step over items, such as clothing, that belong to males, since her power could have an adverse effect on the men or boys.  During the year following the change, the woman was taught not to touch, gather or eat foods that grow in the wild, because it is our belief that her power could affect the future growth and availability of these foods.  A tobacco offering and ceremony would need to take place before she could handle these foods again.  This is just a partial list of what she was taught.

These beliefs and traditions grew out of a respect for the mystery and inner spirituality of women.  Our traditions teach us to be reverent of the great power of our daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and grandmothers.  These women are key to our survival, our physical health, and our future as a community.  To honor and respect the inner strength, power and spirituality of all women is a noble goal for Indians and non-Indians alike.