

movement of the sun and stars. They acquired the horse around 1700 and became a dominating force within the Missouri River Basin by virtue of their skills as mounted equestrians. In 1851, Lakota bands, along with other Plains tribes, signed a treaty with the federal government at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, creating an aboriginal territory that encompassed parts of Nebraska, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota. In 1868, they signed another treaty that established the entire western portion of modern-day South Dakota as a reservation for their “undisturbed and exclusive use.”

Included in Lakota-held lands was He Sapa, the Black Hills. After the discovery of gold by Custer’s forces in 1875, He Sapa was taken illegally for white settlement, something still contested and in litigation today, although in the early 1980s the U.S. Supreme Court established once and for all that the Lakota hold exclusive title to the Black Hills. He Sapa, sometimes known as Paha Sapa, is land considered sacred by the Lakota and other Plains tribes. It is known as *wamaka ognaka y cante* (the heart of everything that is).

During the westward movement by gold seekers and immigrants, the Lakota actively participated in the defense of their lands under such leaders and strategists as Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Gall, American Horse, and Rain in the Face. The Lakota were notably present at the victory of Greasy Grass (the Little Bighorn) and the subsequent defeat of George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry on June 25, 1876.

By 1888, intense suffering, starvation, and death on the reservations prompted people to participate in the Ghost Dance movement in an effort to restore lost relatives and the traditional way of life. Allegedly for their participation in the movement, over three hundred disarmed Lakota men, women, and children of Chief Big Foot’s band of Mnicoujou were massacred by the Seventh Cavalry, Custer’s reconstituted force, on December 29, 1890, at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. In 1986, Birgit Kills Straight and several other descendants of the Bigfoot Band survivors led the first Big Foot Memorial Horseback Ride, which led up to a spiritual ceremony called *istamniyanpi wasigla* “to wipe the tears” of the people for this sorrowful event. In December of 1990 the fifth and final ride took place, marking the hundred-year anniversary of the massacre.

RELIGIOUS SYSTEM. The notion of a religious system is more applicable to Western ideology and Christian missionaries’ efforts to understand a spiritual philosophy different from their own than it is to the beliefs of the Lakota. For the Lakota, religion is not compartmentalized into a separate category. More appropriately, Lakota traditions can be characterized as a system of spirituality that is fully integrated into a rhythm of life that includes all aspects and patterns of the universe. At the center of this rhythm is Wakan Tanka or Tunkashila, sometimes translated as Grandfather and often as Great Spirit or Great Mystery, but better left untranslated. Cannupa Wakan (the sacred pipe) and the subsequent smoke carries messages from humans to *Wakan Tanka*. The system

LAKOTA RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS. *Lakota*, meaning “friends or allies,” are Plains Indian peoples. They represent the largest of three divisions within the political body known as the Tetonan, along with the Dakota and Nakota. The Lakota are also known as the Western Sioux, although the latter is a pejorative name meaning “snakes in the grass,” applied to them by Algonquian-speaking neighbors to the east. *Lakota* also designates the language spoken by the seven bands of the Oceti Sakowin (seven council fires): Oglala, Sicangu, Mnicoujou, Itazipco, Oohenumpa, Sihasapa, and Hunkpapa. In the past, the Lakota occupied areas of what are now Montana, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, and Nebraska. As of the 2000 census, over 108,000 U.S. residents identify as Lakota, many living on or near reservations in South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota.

Often represented in media and film as the typical Indians of the Plains, the Lakota have historically been a nomadic people who organize their lives and ceremonies around the

is based on respect and emphasizes that the virtues or values of bravery, fortitude, wisdom, and generosity be followed and perpetuated.

James R. Walker, a physician at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, between 1896 and 1914, was one of the most influential non-Indian revisers of Lakota spirituality. Ella Deloria expressed her skepticism in the 1930s about his work, and, more recently, his interpretations have been considered specious by William K. Powers. It has been hypothesized that George Sword, an Oglala Lakota, gave Walker an explanation of the Lakota system in Christian theological terms to make it understandable to him, and Walker misinterpreted and further changed some of Sword's descriptions based on his own Christian notions and ideology.

Some of Walker's work accurately reflects Lakota belief and information from Sword. His work describes a number of Lakota spirits who inhabited the earth prior to humans. Takuskanskan (that which moves-moves); Wi (Sun), who is married to Hanwi (Moon), with whom he has one daughter, Wohpe (Falling Star); Old Man and Old Woman, whose daughter *Ite* (Double Face) is married to Tate (Wind), with whom she has four sons, Tate Topa (the Four Winds). An important spirit is *Iktomi* the trickster. Iktomi conspires with Old Man and Old Woman to increase their daughter's status by arranging an affair between the Sun and Ite. The discovery of the affair by the Sun's wife leads to punishments by Takuskanskan, who gives the Moon her own domain, and in the process separates her from the Sun. Old Man, Old Woman, and Ite are sent to earth, but Ite is separated from Tate, who, along with the Four Winds and a fifth wind establishes space as the universe known today. The daughter of the Sun and the Moon, Wohpe, falls to earth and later resides with South Wind.

The emergence. Alone on the newly formed earth, Ite prevails upon Iktomi to find her people, Pte Oyate (the Buffalo People or Nation). In the form of a wolf, Iktomi travels beneath the earth and discovers a village of humans. Iktomi tells them about the wonders of the earth and convinces one man, *Tokahe* (the first), to accompany him to the surface. Tokahe does so and upon reaching the surface through the emergence place, located in Wind Cave in the Black Hills of South Dakota, marvels at the green grass and blue sky. Iktomi and Ite introduce Tokahe to buffalo and show him tipis, clothing, and hunting utensils. Tokahe returns to the village and appeals to six other men, and their families to travel with him to the earth's surface. When they arrive, they discover that Iktomi has deceived them. The weather has turned bad, and they find themselves starving. Unable to return to their home, but armed with a new knowledge about the world, they survive with the help of their relative the buffalo. The skull of this animal is a significant symbol that represents Lakota *Wicoh'an* (the traditional way of life).

The Seven Sacred Rites. According to contemporary Lakota oral historical accounts and discussions with elders, the following is a description of the Seven Sacred Rites of the

Lakota and of how these rites came to the people. Many years ago, during a period of starvation, there appeared to the Lakota a beautiful woman who was met by two hunters. One hunter lusts for her, and is covered by a mist and reduced to bone. The other hunter, who possesses a good and pure heart, is instructed to return to camp and tell the chief and people that she, Ptehincalaskawin (White Buffalo Calf Woman), will appear to them the next day for she has something of importance to tell them. He obeys, and a great council tipi is constructed. Ptehincalaskawin presents to the people a bundle containing the sacred pipe and tells them that in time of need they should smoke and pray with the pipe for help. The smoke from the pipe will carry their prayers upward.

She then instructs them in the great *Wicoh'an Wakan Sakowin* (Seven Sacred Rites), the basis of Lakota spirituality, which have been recorded by Joseph Brown in the words of Nicholas Black Elk in *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Sacred Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Ptehincalaskawin pledges to watch over the people and to return someday. Upon leaving, she walked a short way off and lay down in the grass. When she stood again she had turned into a white buffalo calf, and walked over the hill, out of sight. The Sacred Buffalo Calf Pipe remains among the people today.

First rite. The first of the Seven Sacred Rites (though they are not chronological) is *Inikagapi* or *Inipi* (to renew life). A sweat lodge is held in a dome-shaped structure made of saplings and covered with hide or tarps that symbolizes the shape of the universe and/or the womb of a pregnant woman. Heated stones are placed in a central hole in the lodge and water is poured over them by an *itancan* (leader) to create steam. The purpose of the ceremony is to pray for health and well-being, spiritually and physically. The lodge "utilizes all the Powers of the universe: earth, and the things which grow from the earth, water, fire, and air" (p. 31).

Second rite. The second rite is *Hanbleceyapi* (crying for a vision). The vision quest is undertaken by an individual with the help and guidance of a holy man. A person elects to go on a vision quest to pray, communicate with the spirits, and attempt to gain knowledge, strength, and understanding. The person pledges to stay on an isolated hill for one to four days with a blanket and a pipe, but without food or water. Upon returning, the vision may be discussed with the *wicasa wakan* (holy man). Often the meaning of the vision is not readily apparent and the individual may be told to wait for knowledge and understanding.

Third rite. The third rite is *Wanagi Wicagluha* (keeping of the spirit). Spirit keeping is a rite performed by a mourner for one year to grieve for a lost loved one. When a person dies the spirit can linger around the family and community. According to Black Elk, "this rite purifies the souls of our dead, and our love for one another is increased" (p. 10). A special place is set up for the spirit, who is fed every day. Members of the family and community can come and visit, eat, and sit with the spirit and family. After one year the spirit

is ceremonially released and the mourning period is formally ended. It is usual among the Lakota for the mourning family to refrain from attending or participating in secular activities, gatherings, or events during this formal grieving period.

Fourth rite. The fourth rite is *Wiwanyang Wacipi* (sun dance). The Sun Dance is often considered the most important rite, and it is held during the summer when the moon is full. In times past a number of Plains bands of the Lakota would gather at a prearranged location for the annual meeting of the *Oceti Sakowin*; this was the occasion prior to Greasy Grass. It was during this annual gathering that the Sun Dance ceremony was held. During the ceremony, dancers pledge to make offerings of their flesh so that “much strength would be given to the nation” (p. 99) and to fulfill personal vows. The choice to participate is solely that of each individual. It is usually the result of receiving a sacred dream or is undertaken to seek assistance in healing a sick loved one. The sacred tree that is placed at the center of the dance area symbolizes *Wakan Tanka*, the center of the universe.

Fifth rite. The fifth rite is *Hunkapi* (making relatives). It establishes a “relationship on earth, which is a reflection of that real relationship” with *Wakan Tanka* (p. 101). It was usually performed to unite a younger person with a family, and it can be a way of solidifying relationships with other individuals as well as *Wakan Tanka*. This ceremony represents the formal adoption of people as relatives.

Sixth rite. The sixth rite is *Isnati Awicalowanpi* (puberty ceremony). The ceremony takes place after a girl’s first menses, and prayers are said to ensure the girl will grow up to have all the virtues of a Lakota woman and understand the meaning of her new role, and to formally announce her eligibility as a potential wife and mother.

Seventh rite. The seventh rite is *Tapa Wankayeyapi* (throwing the ball), a game “which represents the course of a man’s life” (p. 127). A young girl stands at the center and throws a ball upward and to the four corners as people vie to catch it. The person to catch the ball is considered more fortunate than the others, for the ball is symbolically equated with knowledge.

Essential beliefs. For the Lakota, the nature of the universe is a whole, and above, below, and around are all part of that whole. Life is seen as a series of recurrent travels, and each person has a purpose to fulfill, one that will support and benefit the community.

People live through four generations: childhood, adolescence, maturity, and old age. When a person dies, one of his four souls travels southward, along the *Wanagi Tacanku* (spirit path, identified with the Milky Way), where it meets with an old woman who examines its earthly virtues, directing the soul either to the spirit world, where there is an unending supply of buffalo and where people rejoin their kin, or back to earth where they are reborn and given another chance to live in harmony. Because of this the birth of children is a joyful event since they are closest to the spirit world

and considered sacred. Twins are particularly auspicious and considered intellectually mature at birth. Many rites help develop the proper behavior of children through observation and listening.

The sacred is the domain of the *wicasa wakan* (holy men), who conduct all spiritual ceremonies. The most important symbol is the sacred pipe, whose smoke represents prayers offered to *Wakan Tanka*. In addition to its general interpretation as something like “great spirit,” this single name refers to important beings and powers, half of which existed prior to the creation of the earth, and half as a result of it. *Wakan Tanka*, in the sacred language of the medicine men, underscores the belief that all sacred things come in fours. The root *wakan* (sacred) is a dynamic concept indicating the potentiality of anything to transform from the secular to sacred. *Iktomi* the trickster named all things, taught culture to humans, and remains on the earth to continually deceive them. The trickster is smart and works to fool humans for his own benefit. His is the power to deceive. *Iktomi* stories frequently are told with humor and serve as lessons for young children as well as adults since *Iktomi* often plays the fool. But he is capable of bringing real danger and destruction, as well.

Contemporary religion. All of the Seven Sacred Rites are still performed, with the exception of *Tapa Wankayeyapi*. In addition, a vital religious practice known as *Yuwipi* became popular in the twentieth century. It encompasses a number of cultural concepts related to traditional life and problems confronting contemporary Lakota peoples. This rite is performed in a darkened room under the supervision of a *Yuwipi* man or *wicasa wakan*. The object is to cure a person and at the same time to pray for the general welfare of all Indian people and for long life for the kinship group. Some *Yuwipi* men possess an exceptional ability that allows them to locate lost items or people.

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