LAKOTA: A STUDY IN CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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Although anthropologists and other social scientists have shown a great deal of interest in the concept of change, our personal interests have focused not so much on the phenomenon of change but on the manner in which things change. This point of view was emphasized during our research among one group of people, the Lakota of the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. The Lakota are better known by the term “Sioux,” which their enemies, the Chippewa and other Algonquian-speakers, used to differentiate them from other powerful enemies—the Iroquoian peoples to the east, whom they called “snakes.” “Sioux” is a French corruption of nadowesi-ih meaning “little snakes.” Despite its popularity, the term is obviously insulting and objectionable to the Lakotas, who since 1970 have made a conscious attempt to promote the use of their own tribal term which may be translated loosely as “allied.”

Our close contact with the people has led us to focus more on those aspects of Lakota culture that have either resisted change entirely or at least contributed to the persistence of what is seen to be a unique form of culture called Lakota. We especially look at change as a form of continuity.

Our position is informed not only by anthropological theory but by what, based on a great number of years doing ethnography on Lakota-speaking reservations and communities, we know to be the Lakota point of view. As a result of trying to understand what Lakotas consider to be continuity in culture, we believe that in the process of receiving new things from Euroamerican culture—such as horses, guns, alcohol, food, clothing, transportation, and ideologies—Lakotas have, under many circumstances, simply transformed these new and often foreign ideas into traditional forms of Indian culture by simply assigning them Lakota values. We call this process Lakotification, and we believe that perhaps all societies of the world exhibit these characteristics as part of a strategy to maintain their own sense of being different as they face a growing world of threatening similarities.

We should emphasize that our analysis is not entirely attributable to anthropological theory as such; Lakotas consciously make these transformations daily. They call the process yulakota, which simply means “to make it Lakota.” They do it in a number of ways which ultimately creates a distinct Lakota world view, which serves to strengthen a sense of community on the reservation, but also provides Lakotas with a self-identity that gives them courage and pride when they leave their home to
attend school, join the military, or find jobs off the reservation. This Lakota identity is also one that other non-Lakotas as well as non-Indians frequently admire and emulate. Lakotas for many reasons have served as the stereotypic Indian of the Plains, and they have been well known throughout precontact and contact history for their bravery in battle and statesmanship during peace times. The Lakota were famous, and still are.

When we speak of our lengthy relationship with the Lakota, we begin with Bill’s first trip to Pine Ridge in 1948, when he was thirteen, and our subsequent trips together since 1957. We were not anthropologists then, but we later went to school, received our degrees, and began teaching anthropology nearly twenty years after first visiting the Lakota. Some students become interested in American Indians through anthropology. We became interested in anthropology through American Indians. Although we have visited and spent some time on two thirds of the reservations in the United States, our long-range research has been at Pine Ridge, the second largest reservation in the nation, where together we have amassed nearly eighty years of continuous research. We would like to describe some of the things we’ve learned from the Lakotas whom we have known and loved for nearly a half century.

**LAKOTA COUNTRY**

One hundred years after 260 Lakotas were annihilated by remnants of Custer’s Seventh Cavalry at the infamous Wounded Knee Massacre, the Lakota continue to enjoy a notoriety unequaled by any other American Indian tribe in the United States. A series of legal battles fought over the ownership of their sacred Black Hills in South Dakota; several theatrical productions and television movies such as *Dances with Wolves*, *Incident at Oglala*, and *Thunderheart*; and best-selling books such as *Black Elk Speaks* and *Son of the Morning Star* have kept the Lakota name alive long after the last battle was fought on the Great Plains against the U.S. Cavalry in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The Lakota, located mainly on reservations in the state of
South Dakota, as well as a few reserves in Canada and numerous enclaves in large American cities, continue to practice what most Lakotas perceive to be their traditional culture. Hardly a week goes by when there is not some mention of life on the South Dakota reservations on television and in magazines and newspapers. Much, if not most, of the media exposure is negative: It plays up the poverty, alcoholism, health problems, teenage pregnancies, and what non-Indian journalists perceive to be a sense of futility for people living in the poorest counties in the United States, where the average income is less than two thousand dollars per year and where unemployment reaches eighty percent. Almost none of the white press ever looks for the strength that the Lakota have mustered against all odds to retain their heritage and the spirit of their grandfathers. For most of the world, Lakota culture is a concept of the past; for most Lakotas, it exists in the present, sometimes changing, but nonetheless strong. The continuity of this culture is what guarantees a strong and positive future for generations yet to be born.

Lakotas feel that New-Agers and other non-Indians frequently have coopted American Indian religions as part of their newfound heritage. Even Lakota language and culture have been borrowed so as to bring non-Lakota peoples closer to what they believe to be a sense of true spirituality in an age of global decline in morality and values. Throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe vision quests and sweat lodges, two of the most important Lakota rituals, are conducted for non-Indian people following what they believe to be the Lakota way. Sometimes unscrupulous Indians charge their clients exorbitant amounts of money to participate in the Lakota way of prayer. Most Lakotas regard this as a sacrilege, but it is impossible to protect the religion of a people who are so well known for their spirituality.

In 1973 the Pine Ridge reservation was the focus of hostilities between factions of Lakotas under the banner of the American Indian Movement (AIM) on the one hand, and conservative members of the tribe and the United States government on the other. Approximately five hundred Lakotas and their allies took over the hamlet of Wounded Knee, where the memories of those slain there eighty-three years before had never vanished, and stayed for seventy days in protest of the govern-
ment’s treatment of all Indians. As a result, two persons were killed, and one paralyzed for the rest of his life. The effects of the occupation, as it was called, was to split Lakota families and friends on the reservation. It took more than ten years for the wounds to heal. Although now there is peace and tranquility on the reservation, the Lakota are still mindful of the often controversial role they play in modern American history and politics.

**ANTHROPOLOGY ON THE RIDGE**

There has been a consensus that anthropologists have been attracted to the Lakota reservations as buffalo are attracted to short grass. Although this is frequently the case, very few individual anthropologists have spent a great deal of time on the reservation to conduct ethnographic research. The belief that Lakotas have an unlimited number of anthropologists at their disposal to record their everyday lives is partly based on the fact that non-Indian (and Indian) scholars and other professional people have virtually inundated Pine Ridge over the past thirty years. Most are physicians, nurses, social psychologists, psychiatrists, legal consultants, social workers, educators, federal and state officials, FBI agents, and a relatively small number of tourists who are drawn to the reservations while summering in the Badlands and Black Hills. If you are armed with a camera, tape-recorder, and notebook, chances are you will be singled out as another anthropologist. However, while during the Sun dance and powwow seasons there may be as many as thirty anthropologists interspersed with other spectators, most have not stayed more than the few days of the event. Even the founders of American anthropology such as Franz Boas, John Swanton, Clark Wissler, and Robert Lowie (among others), known for their research among the Lakota, did little more than visit the reservations for a limited amount of time. Among those who did spend more time in the field were Alice C. Fletcher and Frances Densmore, who made significant contributions to the study of Lakota music, dance, and religion. The anthropologist Scudder McKeel spent some time working for the government at Pine Ridge. Luis Kemnitzer conducted important field work
with an emphasis on Yuwipi, a modern Lakota healing ceremony, and is one of the few anthropologists who continues to return to the reservation.4

We arrived together at Pine Ridge in 1957, the year of our marriage. Neither one of us was trained in anthropology, which was the farthest thing from our mind. We had gone out each year simply to visit Lakotas that Bill had become friendly with as a boy at an international folk festival in his natal home of St. Louis. Although we never thought we were doing field work (and still have a difficult time regarding our relationship with the Lakota people as “research,” even though we have published extensively on their culture and language), what we did in our early years (before becoming anthropologists) was simply learn everything we could about the things that were important to Lakota people. In retrospect, we are happy that we collected cultural and linguistic information out of passion rather than with theoretical prejudices, and support those anthropologists who promote the idea of generating theory from ethnographic data rather than the reverse.

Our methodological approach made us aware of the importance of kinship and language to Lakotas because it is what they most often talked about. The Lakota kinship system, as we learned right away, is very much alive. The first thing that a Lakota does upon meeting a new person is to figure if and how they are related. If they are related then it is mandatory that Lakota kinship terms be used in addressing each other. Otherwise, a person’s first or family name is used. Younger people at one time were referred to through their parents as a form of respect, a custom known as teknonymy in anthropology. For example, when our own children were called to receive a gift at a public function they were always referred to as the sons of the Powersons.

Not surprisingly, the manner in which Lakotas address members of their own family and other relatives differs from the Euroamerican system. For example, ego calls one’s mother and mother’s sister “mother” (ina), and one’s father and father’s brother “father” (ate). Mother’s brothers are called “uncle” (leksi) and father’s sisters are called “aunt” (tunwin). Ego calls the children of everyone he calls “mother” and “father” by the same terms as one’s siblings (elder brother, elder sister, younger brother, younger sister), and the children of those he calls “uncle” and “aunt” are termed male cousin and female cousin.
Grandparents are distinguished by gender, but grandchildren are not. Almost all older people who are not otherwise related specifically are out of respect called “grandfather” (tunkasila) and “grandmother” (unci) and all small children similarly are called “grandchild” (takoja).\(^3\)

Another important part of the kinship system is what anthropologists call fictive relationships, which are created through adoption ceremonies. Early on when Bill first went to Pine Ridge he had been given a Lakota name at a dance held in the small hamlet of Oglala. After seeing his enthusiasm for Lakota dance, the elders assembled held a meeting in the dance hall and decided to give him the name of a prominent Lakota who was deceased, Wanbli Waste, or “Good Eagle.” The idea of handing down names of the living and deceased is rather common. Some old people name their grandchildren after themselves and therefore give up the right to use their own name in the future. Naming someone after the deceased allows that name and the spirit of the deceased to live on. One might say that these are both inherent means of maintaining continuity in Lakota culture that date since before the white man arrived.

Subsequently Bill was adopted by Henry White Calf’s family with whom he lived in a small community called Wagluhe Oti, or “Loafer Camp” in which some of the original descendants of the famous Lakota chief Red Cloud lived. Although Red Cloud’s band was called the Hesica, “Bad Faces,” those members who hung around the soldier forts were referred to as “loafers,” hence the name of the community. Later, Bill was adopted also by Frank Afraid Of Horses, grandson of the famous chiefs, Old Man and Young Man Afraid of Horses. After we began to come to the reservation as a family, Marla was adopted by Charles Red Cloud, grandson of the original chief, and given the name Tacannunpe Wakanwin, “Her Holy Pipe,” and at the same time, our eldest boy, Jeff, was similarly adopted by the Red Cloud family and given the name Wicahpi Ska, “White Star.” Our youngest son, Greg, was adopted by the Afraid of Horses family and named Wamniomni, “Whirlwind.” The Red Clouds and the Afraid of Horses also were related which made it difficult for us to know what part of the kinship system we were operating under because the adopted kin of each of us and our spouses’ adopted kin could be addressed by more than one term. This was quickly rectified by using two sets of kin terms and related behaviors and using them in a way that was unambiguous depending on what relatives were present.
Being in the field as a married couple certainly has its advantages, and having one’s children about also adds a significant dimension to learning about another culture. We emphasize learning as opposed to studying because the latter term has become offensive to many Lakotas who equate it with the act of placing culture at an analytical distance or under a microscope without really interacting or living in it. There is a very fine line, if indeed a line at all, between the anthropological notion of participation and observation. Personally, we consider learning about culture as something accomplished by observing through participation rather than distinguishing between the two ideas. We also recognize that this is the way Lakotas learn about culture, but not generally the way anthropologists do.

From the anthropological point of view, our presence as a family unit allowed us to interact with the community in a non-threatening way. Married couples do not pose a threat to the existing structure as is often the case when a single man or woman enters the community. Furthermore, youngsters participate in “children’s” culture with their friends so parents can see firsthand how they grow up in the community. We never thought much about the intimacy we shared with other community members. It all seemed very spontaneous and natural to us. However, occasionally we became aware of other “strangers” whose intentions were sometimes misread because they were single, or unrelated in the community. Our multiple adoptions into Lakota families were not a reward for our expressed interest in their culture. It was the beginning of a long-term relationship. As kin, we were not expected to stand back and observe Lakota culture. It was fully anticipated that we would share in it, and whenever necessary, as the Lakotas say, “help out.”

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The fundamental building block of the Lakotas still is the family (tiwahe) usually composed of parents, children and elders. Several families form a camp (wicoti). In the old days the camp was the basic living unit during the winter, and might comprise as many as twenty-five to fifty persons. Several camps formed
the *tiyospaye*, which does not have a precise translation in English, but is similar to the anthropological notion of “band.” The tiyospaye regulated marriage, so that members of one tiyospaye were required to marry members of another. One was born into it and remained a member for life. Lakotas still find it important to know the names of their tiyospayes, which have remained at seven even though their constituent camps fluctuate depending on the rise and fall of local populations.

Several tiyospayes form a “tribe” (*oyate*), that is, an assemblage of bands. In the old days the major difference between band and tribe was that the former had an ad hoc leader, while the latter had a permanent leader who after the reservation period was chosen because he was a good administrator who could negotiate with representatives of the federal government. The band leader was replaceable if he failed to find game or be successful on retaliatory war journeys. But the tribal leader, the so-called “chief,” governed until he died naturally or until he was assassinated in some reservation power struggle. At Pine Ridge the oyate bears the political designation *Oglala*, meaning “to scatter one’s own,” a term that probably refers to an historical separation of bands. During most of our time on the reservation we stayed at the home of the Afraid of Horses in the Red Cloud community where most trace their lineage to the Bad Face tiyospaye.

When several tiyospayes came together for the summer buffalo hunt and Sun dance it was necessary to have a highly structured organization to facilitate its many members which sometimes numbered several thousand. The various bands formed a camp circle called the *hocoka*. Each band had its designated place, and a governing body was elected to oversee the daily activities and to prevent eager hunters from breaking ranks and frightening off the buffalo herd before all had a chance to chase them. The band leaders, called *wicasitancan* (“man chief”) and representing each of the tiyospaye, appointed four men called *wicasayatanpi* (“praiseworthy men”) also known as “shirt wearers” from their particular badge of office, a hair fringed shirt. They in turn charged yet another group of four men known as the *wakicunze* (literally, “those who make decisions for others”) with determining where the traveling bands should set up camp, and when it was time to hunt.
Still another group of men known as *akicita* and respected for their bravery in battle were entrusted with carrying out the orders of the wakicunze. They were supervised by an *akicita itancan*, or “soldier chief” and it was their duty to see that young men under the penalty of whipping or even death, would not sneak off to hunt buffalo before the entire camp was ready and thus jeopardize the welfare of the entire camp.

The camp, which often was so large that the tipis formed concentric circles, symbolized the unity of the Lakota people. Everything inside the hocoka was safe; everything outside was potentially dangerous. The circle also was known as *cangleska wakan*, the “sacred hoop.”

This original political system was overthrown by the U.S. government. As a result of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, it was eventually replaced by an elected tribal council consisting of a president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and fifth person, as well as representatives from each of the districts representing numerous tiyospayes and wicotis. The original chiefs and shirt wearers continued to function as figureheads, handing down their titles to the next generation. Although they are still consulted in tribal matters, their real power has been diminished by elected officials.

The importance of the akicita, the contemporary designation for “soldier,” also has been changed to reflect modern times. The warrior societies continue to play an important part in Lakota social life mainly as a result of male and female participation in World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm. Although it was anticipated that warrior societies would disappear after Lakotas were placed on reservations, the Lakotas along with other American Indians immediately volunteered to fight for the United States in all its wars. Returning soldiers were welcomed as warriors coming back from the warpath, and the old honor songs that once heralded their victories against Pawnees and Crows again sung of their heroics against Germany, Japan, and other enemies. Even women who traditionally celebrated the victories of their male relatives in the Scalp dance carrying trophies of war, also became actively involved. Beginning with World War II, they joined the WACS, WAVES, and Army Nurse Corps. To help preserve and stimulate Lakota culture, the people never let the warrior culture die.
War songs and victory dances told of the continuing warrior tradition. Even the National Anthem was composed and sung in the native language.

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\begin{align*}
Tunkasilayapi \ tawapaha \ kinhan \\
Oihankesni \ he \ najin \ kte \\
Iyohlate \ wan \ oyate \ kinhan \ wicicagin \ kta \ ca \\
Lecamun \ welo
\end{align*}
\]

The flag of the United States
Shall fly forever
Beneath it, the people will flourish
That is why I am doing this.

Thus much public display was regarded as a kind of ironic patriotism, with Lakotas fighting on behalf of a nation that in effect had harshly conquered its people. However in reality Lakotas had simply retained much of their prereservation culture by simply applying its values to modern day problems. But it was not only warfare that served as a conduit for cultural continuity.8

For example, when the once-nomadic tiyospayes were immobilized as a result of the reservation system, each settled in a distinct area, usually a place that afforded wood, water, and some protection from severe weather. These tiyospayes bore names such as Payabya, “Pushed Aside”; Tapisleca, “Spleen”; Kiyaksa, “Breakers of the Rule”; Wajaje, “Osage”; Itesica, “Bad Faces”; Oyuhpe, “Untidy”; and Wagluhe, “Loafers.” The longer Lakotas stayed in these settlements the more the assemblage of tipis and wall tents gave way to log cabins and frame houses. Soon these population centers began to take on the characteristics of small towns. Since the buffalo were all but extinct, Lakotas like other Indians survived on foods distributed to them as partial fulfillment of the treaties signed with the federal government.

Given the drastic change from their once powerful place on the Plains to subservience to the white man and his way of government, the Lakotas adapted marvelously well to the reservation system. During this time, from 1868 on, Lakotas were frequently required to abdicate some of their cherished religious ideas under pressure of missionaries. Reservations were operated usually by army officers, supported with a detachment of Indian police, and when needed, troops. The government believed that in order for Lakotas to be “civilized” they should...
begin farming their own plots of land, an idea totally foreign to them. Military appointees called “boss farmers” were sent to the reservations to teach the Lakota how to farm. And although some Lakotas took to it immediately, most never had the desire to “scratch the earth,” as they called it. The Lakotas, once the greatest equestrians of the Plains never gave up their love for horses, but starting herds of horses or cattle was an expensive proposition, and those few who were successful fell woefully to the ravages of the Great Depression.

During the twentieth century approximately a dozen Christian denominations were vying for the loyalties of the various tiyospayes. Because by customary Lakota law two people from the same tiyospaye could not marry, potential spouses had to be chosen from another. The various denominations were easily transformed into symbolic representations of tiyospayes. Because almost all denominations were represented, Catholics were forced to marry Episcopalians, or Episcopalians marry Presbyterians ad infinitum so as to avoid the problem of marrying persons of the same tiyospayes. The results of these interfaith marriages are well documented in the many cemeteries that dot the reservation: A husband is buried in a Catholic cemetery and a wife in a Protestant one. Although allegiance to a Christian denomination was seen as total Christianization of Lakota pagans, in fact, Lakota religion continued to retain its vitality despite this perceived conversion. Instead of religious ministration, many missionaries simply made it possible for Lakotas to survive by providing them with food, clothing, and refuge from a sometimes hostile military.9

The reservation system, despite the Lakotas ability to adapt to it, was always an oppressive system because Lakotas essentially were prisoners on their own land. At one time it was necessary for persons to receive written permission to leave the reservation, and the government-appointed agent often was ruthless. Schools run by the federal government and missionaries also were oppressive in that they forced children to be separated from their parents for the school year in order to guarantee that they would be “civilized.” Students were forbidden to speak their native language, and young boys had to cut their braids. They were dressed as white persons and were taught trades. Women fared better because most of the things they were taught were of a managerial nature often providing a better background for them in future administrative jobs on and off the reservation. Men for the most part were taught the basic
vocations of carpentry, animal husbandry, and other chores that were intended to be useful to them but mainly as laborers in a white man’s world.

Each of the original homelands of the tiyospayes became administrative “districts” with representation based on population. While a small percent of the Lakotas worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the reservations, and others for the tribe, most Lakotas made a meager living leasing their lands to white farmers and ranchers, an economic system that persists today. Lakotas were indeed land rich, but they were always on the verge of poverty often staying alive on government handouts. But one aspect of their culture provided a stability otherwise denied them, around which they could rally despite the hardships inflicted upon them by the reservation system. As in the past, when confronted with injustice, indecision, and the vicissitudes of their precarious lives, Lakotas turned to their religion, today perhaps the greatest measure of Lakota persistence in cultural values.

**SPIRITUAL LIFE**

The Lakota believe that long ago during a famine, a beautiful woman appeared to them bringing them seven sacred rites which should be performed whenever the people were in trouble or sought supernatural aid. She was called *Ptehincalasanwin*, or “White Buffalo Calf Woman,” referring to the belief that she changed into a white buffalo calf upon leaving the people.

The seven rites, most of which continue to be performed today, are the backbone of Lakota culture and spirituality. Additionally, some new ceremonies have been added to the original seven in an effort to adapt Lakota religion to modern times.10

*Inikagapi*, “renewal lodge,” or better known in the literature as the sweat lodge, is almost universal among American Indian nations in North America. Under the supervision of a *wicasa wakan*, “sacred or ‘medicine’ man,” several men gather inside a dome-like structure of saplings over which blankets are placed to ensure that heat will be retained. A hole is dug in the center
of the lodge into which white hot stones are placed. As the ritual begins, water is poured on the coals to create a vapor. Inside, the men pray and sing, and are visited by supernatural beings and powers for the purpose of renewing or sanctifying the participants. The sweat lodge is a ritual in its own right but frequently serves as a preface for other rituals.

On several occasions, Bill has participated in the inikagapi not only inside the lodge, but as the “fireman,” or person in charge of heating the stones and placing them inside the lodge. With the permission and encouragement of Lakotas, he has also recorded entire sweat lodges from outside the lodge where the prayers and songs clearly can be heard. The only proviso was that sage, a sacred plant symbolic of long life, must be placed on the tape recorder so that the spirits would not be offended by its presence.

Hanbleceya, “crying for a vision,” otherwise known as the vision quest, is particularly significant because it is performed less frequently than other rituals. Visions are sought after to help people work out everyday problems by asking for supernatural aid. When a boy reaches puberty and continuing through the remainder of his life, men and boys are placed on a hill by a medicine man for a certain number of days and nights for the purpose of communicating with supernatural beings and powers. The vision quest is considered an ordeal because the supplicant is required to stay alone without food and water. He has only a blanket and a pipe, and must stay within a small plot of earth delineated by sacred offerings. A narrow pit is dug for refuge at nighttime. Soon, he will be visited by spirits of humans, animals, birds, and other natural phenomena who help him make tough decisions. When the time is over, the medicine man interprets the meaning of the vision. The inikagapi and the hanbleceya are considered to be the oldest. The most remarkable change in both rituals is that since the 1960s females have been not only permitted but also encouraged to participate, and now it is commonplace for young women to be placed on the hill or to enter the sweat lodge, once the exclusive domain of men. Female participation in religion is probably a result of general liberation of women associated with the 1960s that ultimately had its effect on Lakota culture.

Wanagi wicagluhapi, the “Ghost-keeping ceremony,” was originally performed when a young person died, particularly
someone considered hoksicantkiye, or “favorite son.” A lock of hair was wrapped in buckskin and attached to a pole kept outside a special mourning lodge when the weather was fair. It was believed that the “soul” of a deceased thus lingered near the place of its death for about one year. Any member of the family wishing to wasigla or mourn (it was usually the mother) would ritually feed the spirit everyday. At the end of the year, the whole band would gather and the spirit would be fed for the last time and thus freed to accompany the other souls which traveled the Wanagi tacanku, the “Ghost Road” or Milky Way. Each star represented the campfire of the deceased. When the souls reached a junction in the south they were free to roam the earth as ghosts, usually friendly ones who reappeared on earth to advise the living. Lakotas are cautious about these ghosts because it is believed that some are lonely and return to try to coax their loved ones to join them in the spirit world, a place that looks very much like the real world used to, where there is plenty of buffalo meat and good times.

Today, the Ghost-keeping ceremony is called Wokiksuye Wohanpi, or “Memorial Feast,” but it has not lost any of its meaning. Lakotas, after a loved one’s death, still feed its spirit. After one year, the entire tiyospaye plus friends and visitors are invited to a large feast cooked by family members for sometimes three hundred or more people. Since mourners are not supposed to travel, or otherwise enjoy themselves, close relatives and friends help them out during this period by bringing them necessities. On the final day of the “dinner” as it is locally called, those people who helped out are given gifts by the mourning family after the spirit has been fed for the last time. These gifts take the form of elaborate hand made star quilts, pots and pans, baskets, footlockers, and cash. Singers are called in to provide special songs, and Christian ministers and medicine men side by side extol the virtues of the loved one. As is true at all Lakota feasts, more food than can be eaten is cooked, and people leave the memorial carrying bags and boxes of wateca, or “leftovers,” on which elders will feast for several days thereafter. At one such memorial in which several hundred people attended, we took home in our wateca buckets ten pounds of meat, several loaves of bread, a box of crackers, and three whole pies. So did everyone else.

At these feasts there is an emphasis on providing traditional Lakota foods to the visitors. At smaller ceremonies, the meat of
a dog or several dogs are served to elders who consider them a
delicacy. Other foods, such as *wasna*, known better by the
Algonquian term *pemmican, papa, “dried meat,”* and *tinpsila,
“prairie turnips,”* also are preferred. But other foods such as cof-
fee, crackers, pies, and the mouth-watering *wigli un kagapi,
“fried bread,”* also have been adopted as traditional Lakota
foods.

*Hunka,* derived from the Pawnee *Hako,* was a ceremony in
which older persons adopted younger ones. Men who had a
good war record or were skillful hunters were chosen to stand
up for boys, while women with a good reputation sponsored
girls. The belief is that the ceremony creates a bond between the
two, one stronger than kinship. The younger persons were
believed to be greatly influenced by the character of their spon-
sors. During the ceremony, a medicine man waved wands
adorned with horsetails over the initiates who sat together
inside a special lodge. At the end of the rituals the older and
younger initiates sat beside each other with their arms bound
together symbolic of their newly formed bonds.

Today the Hunka utilizes ancient prayers and songs, but
focuses more sharply on creating a commitment between adults
and children. During the ceremony, again under the supervision
of a medicine man, adults tie feathers on the heads of those
whom they are adopting. It is believed that the child will some-
how acquire some of the characteristics of the adult who stands
up for him, so parents choose persons with outstanding reputa-
tions. At the conclusion of the tying-of-feathers-ceremony, the
*Hunkayapi,* a term meaning both the child and adult, drink
chokecherry juice and eat a small piece of *wasna* both of which
are considered sacred. When the ceremony is over, the two are
expected to remain responsible to each other for the remainder
of their lives, treating each other as if they were close kin.
Finally, the parents of the children give gifts to those adults to
whom they have become related.

In 1986 Marla was asked to be the Hunka for Vanessa Short
Bull, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Shortbull. At the same
ceremony, the Shortbull’s son, Frank also was to be adopted by
Dr. Ronald Forgey, who once served as a physician at the Public
Health hospital. The ceremony was held at the home of Mr. and
Mrs. Melvin Red Cloud in a circular arbor especially construct-
ed for the occasion. Hundreds of people from the Red Cloud
Community, as well as visitors from several reservations, lined
up to receive generous helpings of food served by the Short Bull family. In the center of the arbor were chairs covered with star quilts, Pendleton blankets, and beadwork. When everyone had finished eating, the two children sat in the chairs, while Marla and Dr. Forgey stood behind their respective hunka.

The ceremony began with an old song and a prayer by an elder, Max Blacksmith. He reminded the hunkayapi about their responsibilities to each other and to the Lakota tribe. He then gave small eagle feathers to the adults which they tied to the heads of their respective hunka. When they had finished, two elderly women passed out sacred wasna and fried bread to the hunkayapi and their families. The singers struck up a song honoring the two newest members of the tribe and everyone danced around the arbor behind the hunkayapi. Marla and Dr. Forgey were instructed to pick up the decorated chairs; the contents of each chair and the chairs themselves were given away to them in appreciation for their participation in the ceremony. Afterwards a huge giveaway took place in which items were given to nearly everyone in attendance.

Isnati awicalowanpi, “to sing over their first menses,” is a girl’s puberty ceremony, sponsored by her mother, grandmother and other female relatives. In an elaborate ceremony in which a medicine man mimicked the behaviors of a buffalo bull, the girl was called upon to understand her responsibilities as a potential mother and provider of her people. After drinking from a bowl of chokecherry juice, and changing her clothing from that of a girl to that of a woman, she was instructed to sit with her legs together and to one side in the manner of a woman. After the ritual, she was considered a candidate for marriage and was greatly feasted by her family who gave away horses, buffalo robes, beadwork, and other material things to those invited to the ceremony.11

Today many of the older Lakota women bemoan the fact that much of the celebration of the young girl’s coming of age has become the responsibility of the schools and churches on the reservation. Although this ceremony lasted throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, it has not been performed publicly since then. Many Lakotas speak of a desperate need for the elders to impart wisdom to the younger generations, and it would not be surprising if this most important ceremony is reinstated.
*Tapawankayeyapi,* “throwing the ball,” was performed by a small girl who stood in the center of four large groups of people located at each of the four directions. She threw a ball made from buffalo hide high into the air toward the group, one direction at a time beginning with the West. All the people scrambled to catch the ball because it would bring them good fortune. The Lakota say that the ball represented *Wakantanka,* the Great Spirit, and the ceremony was symbolic of people trying to be close to their gods. The ball also was symbolic of knowledge and the peoples’ attempt to catch it was regarded as an attempt to free themselves from ignorance. It has not been performed publicly since the turn of the twentieth century, but like the puberty ceremony it is viewed as an important ceremony that should be revived.

*Wiwanyang wacipi,* “Gaze at the sun dance,” or Sun dance, is one of the most important ceremonies of the Lakota, originally performed annually before the summer buffalo hunt. It is best known because of the offering by men whose flesh is pierced and skewered then attached to the center Sun dance pole by means of a long rope. The object is to dance until the flesh tears thus freeing the dancer. Other men have their backs pierced and buffalo skulls attached to the skewered flesh. The men circle the dance arbor dragging the skulls until the flesh breaks. Women offer flesh from their arms, and baby girls have their ears pierced.

Because of the spectacle of self-mortification, many have lost sight of the fact that the Sun dance is a ceremony performed for the welfare of the entire tribe through the sacrifice of very few. Being pierced and attached to the pole is considered a recognition of the ignorance in which humans live. The breaking free of the ropes is a symbol of knowledge that people attain through prayer and suffering. Those who dance these forms of the Sun dance do so because sometime earlier in the year they have vowed to perform it if one of their prayers is answered. In olden days, if a warrior’s life was threatened he might cry out that if he survived he would dance the Sun dance. Today, people may vow that close relatives recover from a serious illness, the pledger will dance the next summer.

Although all the other ceremonies are performed on a small scale, sometimes with only a few individuals in the community, the Sun dance always has been a focus of national attention.
Each year Lakotas from the many reservations gather in one place to perform the Sun dance. Before the reservation, this was a time to prepare for the summer buffalo hunt, and for joining in the various sacred and secular ceremonies sponsored by the chief and warrior societies. Women’s societies also met during this time and aside from the religious nature of the Sun dance, there was much feasting and dancing.

Much of this annual round persisted even though the U.S. Government in 1881 prohibited the Sun dance and the Ghost-keeping ceremonies. Despite an official decree to end these ceremonies as well as other secular dances, much of the Sun dance stayed alive through private ceremonies far out of sight of the whites. Finally, after the Indian Reorganization Act, Lakotas reinstated it without piercing. But in 1959 we witnessed the first public Sun dance at Pine Ridge in which a Lakota offered flesh. After that year, increasing numbers of young and old have returned to the original form of the Sun dance.

In 1973 a major change in the performance of the Sun dance came about. As a direct result of the Wounded Knee Occupation, and the bitterness that had grown between members of the same tribe, the Sun dance failed to attract many people that summer. Subsequently, individual medicine men who have served as directors of the national Sun dance began to have private Sun dances to which only their friends were invited. Although this broke with the canons of Lakota religion which stated that no one could be denied access to the Sun dance grounds to pray (even non-Lakotas and non-Indians), the practice of having several Sun dances, some running simultaneously on all Lakota reservations has continued. In 1974 there were twenty-two Sun dances on the Pine Ridge reservation alone. However, more recently there seems to be one Sun dance for each of the major districts of the Pine Ridge reservation, as well as other dances such as those held at Crow Dog’s Paradise on the Rosebud, and at Green Grass on the Cheyenne River reservation, where the original sacred pipe is kept.

Much of Lakota cosmology is still enacted through these rituals recalling their emergence myth in which the first Lakotas living below the earth were coaxed by Inktomi, the trickster, to come to the surface of the earth and live like real people. The four directions, zenith, and nadir, and the center of the universe are underscored in these rituals through the use of sacred num-
bers (four and seven) and sacred colors (black, red, yellow, and white), as well as animal and bird messengers that represent each corner of the universe. In particular all ceremonies begin and end with smoking the sacred, long-stemmed pipe, the can-nunpa wakan, whose red bowl made from the stone called catlin-
ite represents the blood of Lakota people, and which serves as the major symbol of Lakota spirituality.

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**POW WOW**

With mid-nineteenth century origins among the Pawnee and Omaha Indians, the powwow is unquestionably one of the most important public events in all Indian America. Because the Pine Ridge reservation is located in the geographic center of the pow-
wow circuit, nearly every tribal variation of this ceremony eventu-
tually winds up being Lakotified.12

Originally an Algonquian term meaning the place of a cur-
ing ceremony, powwow has come to signify outdoor and indoor dancing, singing, feasting, and giving away on a large scale. We have watched the powwow evolve over the past forty-five years, picking up momentum each year, growing in number of singers and dancers and in dance and costume styles. At Pine Ridge nearly all the districts sponsor powwows, or wacipi, as they are called in Lakota throughout the entire year, but most are held outdoors during the summertime when singers and dancers can travel from one to the other without missing a weekend of festivities.

At the turn of the twentieth century these dances were held in conjunction with fairs and rodeos. Between the 1940s and 1970s they were normally performed in the afternoons and evenings following each day of the Sun dance. After the mid-
1970s however, powwows became events unto themselves high-
lighted by dance competitions for men, women, and children, who participated according to various styles of dances, some learned from other tribes, but unequivocally transformed into symbols of Lakota culture.

Over the years we have also witnessed a return to tradition-
al costumes for men and women, as well as songs and dances
from prior to 1955 when Lakota style had temporarily given away to imported powwow variations from Oklahoma known as “fancy dancing,” and from the Canadian Plains, the source of then “northern style,” each with its own form of dance movements and costumes for males and females. And although Lakotas participate in national and international powwows, they regard their traditional forms of dance most rewarding even though much of what today passes for traditional has been Lakotified from other tribal styles once foreign to the Lakota.

**Yuwipi**

Although missionaries representing most Christian denominations have been on the scene for over one hundred years, it is traditional religion that continues to serve as the basis for Lakota cultural identity and continuity. Nothing more than the modern healing ritual called *yuwipi*, “to roll up into a ball,” demonstrates that in order to persist, Lakotas are quite capable of reshaping some of their ancient beliefs and rituals to meet modern needs. In many ways, yuwipi is the embodiment of *yulakota*, for the ritual combines many of the old features of Lakota culture once thought to be dysfunctional with aspects of Euroamerican culture into a new and dynamic world view.\(^{13}\)

The characteristic feature of yuwipi is that it is held in total darkness, presided over by a ritual specialist called a *yuwipi wicasa*, “yuwipi man,” who cures patients afflicted with what is called Indian sickness, that is, any sickness believed to have been prevalent before the coming of the white man. The curing is done by means of prayers and songs which are directed to the four directions, zenith and nadir, and center of the universe.

Before the meeting, which takes place at dusk immediately following a sweat lodge, the yuwipi man and his assistants construct an altar of colored flags anchored in coffee cans filled with sacred earth representing the seven directions. Delineating the altar is a string of 405 tobacco offerings, one for each of the species of animals, birds, and plants known to the Lakota, there to attract spirits of humans, animals, and birds, who upon arrival will instruct the yuwipi man how to cure his patient. Once all the devotees have arrived, the doors and windows are
nailed shut and covered with blankets to ensure total darkness, and the ceremony is ready to begin. After filling a sacred pipe, the yuwipi man’s hands are tied behind him and his assistants wrap him in a star quilt. The lights are turned off and the prayers and songs begin coaxing the spirits to come into the darkened room. Their arrival is announced by the sudden clash of rattles on the floor and against the walls and ceilings. Although everything is obscured in the darkness except for tiny sparks that herald the arrival of the spirits, the yuwipi man is capable of seeing the spirits clearly. During the session he communicates with them, and they direct him toward the source of the patient’s illness and how it may be cured. When the singing ends, the spirits are believed to pick up the essence of the tobacco offerings and take them home, a place between the earth and the sky in the West. When the lights are turned on again, the yuwipi man is seen sitting in the middle of the altar, totally freed from his bonds, with the 405 tobacco offerings rolled up neatly in a ball next to him, hence the name.

During the mid-1960s we were able to work closely with yuwipi men and their followers and with their permission recorded their rituals and their songs. During the ceremony, we found that the total Lakota universe, past and present was recreated symbolically, utilizing many of the old prayers, songs, and ideas that were thought to have been forgotten. The fact that the ceremonies were held in modern houses, or employed objects obviously borrowed from the white man in no way detracted from the cultural importance of yuwipi.

**THE PERSISTENCE OF LANGUAGE**

It is somewhat ironic that since 1970 those government and missionary institutions that once attempted to squash the Lakota language, have been leaders in a renewed effort to teach it to younger generations by employing senior Lakotas fluent in the language. Some of these elders were once punished for speaking their native language but apparently to no avail. The language, although somewhat changed, persists.

Furthermore, from the perspective of continuity it is interesting that Lakota, despite over 350 years contact with other lan-
guages, mainly English and French, have resisted using loan words from these languages preferring to create new Lakota words to signify cultural borrowing and new technologies. Only two words to our knowledge actually have been incorporated kamite (“committee” from English) and kukusi (“cochon” ‘pig’ from French). Additionally, these borrowings have generated thousands of new words and expressions in the native Lakota, and continue to be used even though most Lakotas are bilingual. A spattering of these new words will give some idea of how the Lakotas conceptualized and verbalized sometimes strange and bizarre aspects of Euroamerican culture they incorporated into their own.

When the first Lakota saw a horse he called it sunkawakan, “mysterious or sacred dog,” an invented word to describe this mysterious creature. Cows however were something like buffalo so they called them ptegleska, “spotted buffalo cow.” Steers were called tabloka—from the root ta, a generic term for ruminating animals, and bloka, the word for male. The introduction of the horse and cattle literally provided a new vocabulary of Lakota words numbering in the hundreds having to do with the herding and training horses, their many shapes and colors, names for breeds, accoutrements, and later, after they had been Lakotified, a wide range of terms for horse songs, dances, and ceremonies. Similarly, the entire language of ranching was spoken in Lakota.

When the railroad became a part of the west it was called maza canku, “iron road.” However, when Lakotas saw the first side car operated by two men operating a seesaw lever to make the car go on tracks, they were amused with the fact that the men had to bend over to push the car along and so named it patujela, “little bender.” Stores that opened up on the reservation were called masopiye, meaning “iron box,” and referred to the safe in which money was kept.

As wagons were introduced Lakotas invented a very descriptive term campagmiyanpi, which literally refers to something made out of wood that is pushed along. When automobiles reached the reservation they were called iyecinkala inyanke, “it runs by itself,” and the entire engine was discussed in the metaphor of the human body with hoses as arteries, carburetor as heart, and battery as brain. When you had engine trouble the car was said to be “pouting.”
When whites brought alcohol to the trade fairs, Lakotas were astonished at the effects of mniwakan, “sacred water” (whiskey); mnisa, “red water” (wine); and later mnipiga, “boiling water” (beer); all of which made them itonmi, “face spinning around” (intoxicated). At the local “white” dances, musicians played cankahotun, “wood struck to make a noise” (guitar) and canyukize, “wood that squeaks (like a mouse)” (violin).

Virtually no aspect of Euroamerican cultural borrowing required that they be spoken about in the language of their donors. Lakota could say it all and still does. Today many books and magazines are still published in Lakota for use in colleges, high schools and elementary schools on the reservations. And again those institutions that once tried to prohibit the language from being spoken have produced a wide range of grammars and dictionaries all for the purpose of helping Lakotas keep their language alive.

All My Relations

Over the years we have been cautious about any prophecies about the future of American Indian cultures based on acculturation or assimilation, ideas that have been integral to American anthropology even though they contradict the most basic ideas of cultural anthropology: the transmission of culture from one generation to another. We believe that individuals assimilate, but cultures do not. After all, we freely talk about the Westernization or Americanization of other cultures, so why not the Lakotification?

But focusing on continuity does not make us oblivious to change. At Pine Ridge some people do not speak Lakota or know their relatives, a major complaint heard from the elders everyday. Some Lakotas have left the reservation and faded into American cities where the closest ties to their heritage may be the local Indian club. Others adhere to Christian beliefs; some have become ministers, priests, and nuns. Lakotas pledge allegiance, sing the national anthem in English, and go to school to learn American history, math, and science. But underlying this change there is a forceful Lakota way of doing things, relating to
others, Lakota or not, and viewing the world not so much from a position of superiority or inferiority, but of complementariness with all animate and inanimate objects.

This idea of a universal kinship is best expressed in the Lakota phrase mitak’oyas’in, “all my relations,” a statement heard at the end of rituals that codifies what it means to be Lakota, to be Indian, and to be American, and a reaffirmation that one’s future lies in the hope that all creatures can experience a oneness. Judging by the increasing number of non-Lakotas who have been attracted to Lakota culture over the past ten years, the process of Lakotification seems to have a prosperous future.

Notes

1. We are grateful to all the Lakotas at Pine Ridge for their continuous support. We also acknowledge the NEH, APS, Russell Sage, Wenner-Gren, the Rutgers Research Council, and the Seton Hall University Research Council for their generous aid.


5. A complete reference to Lakota kinship terms is found in Eugene Buechel, A Grammar of Lakota (St. Louis, MO: John S. Swift, 1939).

6. The number seven also figures predominantly in the earliest history of the Lakota. Before emigrating to the Plains, the Lakota were part of a confederation called the Oceti Sakowin, comprising the Mdewakantunwan, Wahpetunwan, Sisitunwan, and Wahpekute, known collectively as Isanti, who spoke the
Dakota dialect; the Ihanktunwan and Ihanktuwanna, who spoke Nakota; and the Titunwan, who spoke Lakota. The Titunwan, or Teton, are again subdivided into seven tribes (oyate), the largest being the Oglala, who live predominantly at Pine Ridge.

7. The most prominent are Crazy Horse (1877), Sitting Bull, and Big Foot (1890).


10. Some of the more popular books on Lakota religion are John G. Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks (1932; reprint Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1961); and Joseph Epes Brown, The Sacred Pipe (New York: Penguin Books, 1953). However, both should be read critically.


12. More on powwows can be found in Powers, War Dance: Plains Indian Musical Performance.

13. A complete description can be found in William K. Powers, Yuwipi: Vision and Experience in Oglala Ritual (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

SUGGESTED READINGS


Powers, Marla N. Oglala Women in Myth, Ritual, and Reality.


