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See also: Gimbutas, Marija; Greco-Roman World; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; Roman Natural Religion; Sacred Space/Place.

Lakota

The Lakota, (known historically as the Teton, Sioux and Dakota) are composed of seven tribes: Oglala (They Scatter Their Own), Sicangu (Burned Thighs, also know as Brule), Oohenunpa (Two Kettles), Itazipco (Sans Acrs, Without Bows), Hunkpapa (End of the Camp Circle), Sisasapa (Blackfeet), and Mnicowojou (Planters by the Water). As they moved west out of Minnesota, they became nomadic hunter-gatherers whose resource base included a large number of game animals, particularly the buffalo, but also elk, deer, and other mammals, as well as seeds, fruits, roots, and tubers. They also traded or raided for agricultural products such as corn and squash with the native peoples to the east. The appropriation of the horse after European incursion to the Americas extended their geographical range and increased their food supply. Rifles increased successful hunting of fur-bearing mammals and allowed the Lakota to engage in the fur trade as early as the second half of the eighteenth century. This trade expanded as late as the 1850s.

Anthropology and Lakota oral tradition provide a variety of explanations for the origins of the Lakota and their geographical location on the Plains. According to Lakota oral history, the Lakota emerged from under the Earth in the Black Hills, the spiritual center of their universe, and were the first people in existence. The Black Hills, along with other locations, are therefore part of a sacred geography that encodes Lakota oral and written history and to which important pilgrimages continue to be made.

According to archeology, linguistics and ethnohistory, the Lakota, not yet differentiated into their current political configuration, came to the western Plains from what is now southern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, and northeastern Iowa. They migrated to the Plains by the latter 1700s. The western migration of the Lakota was a response to European immigration that pushed tribes such as the Anishnabe (Ojibwa) further west as well as an attraction to abundant game, especially the buffalo, a key spiritual and nutritional resource with which they have a

special relationship. The decline of buffalo numbers, as well as of other game and vegetal resources, was due to overhunting, deliberate destruction of food resources to restrict the movement of the Lakota and other Plains groups, and disruption of habitat and loss of grazing land through European immigration and then settlement.

This decline was apparent by the 1840s, and the buffalo all but disappeared from the Western plains by the time of the last hunt in 1883. At the same time the United States began restricting the Lakota to reservations in violation of earlier treaty agreements. Lakota lands were further diminished through government legislation (the Allotment Act), which assigned specific amounts of land to individual Lakota and sold off "surplus" lands. This policy continued up until the 1930s.

The Lakota have no word for religion. Belief in and interaction with the sacred are not restricted to certain times, places, or activities, in contrast to Western belief systems in which sacred and profane are important binary oppositions. The Lakota held and continue to hold that all is sacred (*wakan*), although certain objects, activities, and even persons are imbued with more of this sacrality than others. This sacrality can also be sought and obtained by such means as prayer, fasting, self-sacrifice, and generosity. Thus, all of nature is sacred, while certain places, events, and relationships may be more sacred than others. Thus many contemporary Americans see the world in terms of sacred times and non-sacred times and attempt to draw a careful distinction between Church and state while Lakota do not make these divisions. To express these different worldviews, some Lakota say that Whites have "religion" while Lakota have "spirituality."

The Lakota believed and continue to believe that maintaining moral bounds, expressed as doing things "in a good way" is key to success in hunting and in all of life's endeavors. The Lakota did not and do not live in a world of total ecological harmony or mystical participation with all beings: rather they seek balance in the world through reciprocity. At the same time the Lakota remain highly pragmatic in determining causes for disasters in the world, such as the near-extinction of the buffalo, and seek remedies that will serve the needs of future generations.

According to Lakota oral history, the Lakota were granted their spiritual and social organization from a sacred person, the White Buffalo Calf Woman, who gave the people, at a time of starvation, the sacred pipe along with a promise to teach them the rituals and morality required for living as a united group. This pipe links the Lakota to the buffalo as generous relatives who would give their very lives to sustain their kin. The Lakota's buffalo relatives would express familial generosity by providing food and many other useful products.

Religious revelation through personal quest, dreams, and visions remains an important part of this highly charismatic belief system. Thus Lakota spirituality is not a

static set of dogma and precise rituals, locked in a past that can only be duplicated. Rather, it is a dynamic belief system, respectful of and linked to past practices but highly adaptive in addressing contemporary needs. Spiritual leadership comes through the spiritual and life experiences of individuals who take up these roles for the good of the community. Their authority is affirmed by their success in prayer, their good lives, and the allegiance of others who also seek the “wakan” (holy) through their leadership. While the belief system is unified by a common set of rituals and key symbols, there is freedom for individual variation and innovation, always monitored by elder spiritual leaders and general participants.

The key metaphor for Lakota culture is kinship or relatedness. Thus the term “to pray” is also the term used to address someone as a relative. The Lakota see their relationship to their relatives, whether through blood, marriage, or adoption as a sacred responsibility. This kinship extends not just to humans but, most importantly, to the entire universe. Ritually, the Lakota re-create the sacred cosmos that is coterminous with the natural and supernatural world through marking out and praying toward the cardinal directions, the heavens and grandmother Earth (unci maka). Colored flags and the arrangement of participants in a circle make physical this cosmic map. Rituals call on “wakan” entities to help the participants in various tasks and trials. Voluntary suffering and flesh offerings are offered in exchange for this divine patronage. Lakota stress that spirituality should not be used to enhance one’s own prestige. Rather, spirituality and ritual should benefit relatives, and indeed the entire universe. One frequently hears prayers for the protection of creation, the cessation of pollution, the survival of endangered species, peace in troubled areas of the world, and harmony in the universe. Lakota will also frequently stress that all peoples pray to the same God, and, while maintaining their distinctive beliefs and rituals, also see a unity of all spiritual traditions expressed in their own spiritual hospitality. Lakota prayers are ended with “Mitakuye Oyasin,” a prayer for “all my relatives,” which includes the cosmos.

Lakota do not treat these religious aspirations as poetic spiritual expressions. Spiritual commitment must be carried out through action. They disdain outsiders who come to the reservation to engage in romantic spiritual escapism, because such outsiders are not enveloped in the Lakota kinship network sewn together by complex ceremonial and practical obligations and exchanges.

“Ecology” is a relatively recent formulation that does not appear as a social and spiritual movement in the early descriptions and transcriptions of Lakota beliefs as such. Throughout their history and especially during the period of White contact, the Lakota were certainly and acutely aware of issues now labeled as ecological. Some of the issues they faced were conservation of faunal and

floral resources, and, with the coming of Whites, new catastrophic diseases, diminution of their land base, reacquisition of resources such as water, timber and land, preservation of spiritual resources, and care for a rapidly increasing population.

The Lakota recognize that their beliefs and rituals have diffused to other native and non-native groups. In contemporary discussions of their own culture, Lakota move between the poles of universalism and particularism in dealing with the spread of their beliefs. For example, the four colors used in rituals to symbolize and mark out the four directions of the universe are also interpreted today to represent the four “races” of humanity: red, white, yellow and black. At the same time there is lively debate over how far non-Lakota and especially non-Indians should enter into the ritual life of the Lakota. Universalists argue that because the four colors are included in a sun dance or a sweatlodge or a yuwipi all people must be welcome; others hold that these “ways” were given particularly to the Lakota and can only properly be used by the Lakota. Particularists point to numerous examples of exploitation of Lakota rituals for money or individual prestige. Between the poles of exclusion and inclusion, particularist and universalist, there is a gradient: many Lakota welcome non-Indians provided they are respectful, do not try to assume leadership roles or try to control the ceremonies, and do not begin conducting the ceremonies on their own. Some Lakota will give ceremonial leadership for specific rituals to non-Indians: others maintain a total prohibition of non-Indian involvement, excluding even the observation of spiritual events. Essential for participating in Lakota ceremonies are the relationships one has developed with the praying community. When one is welcomed at a ceremony, it is because of relationships that have already been established and which all parties wish to be strengthened.

Lakota spirituality is not restricted to interaction with spiritual beings or the classic rituals so well known to the outside world: sun dance, sweatlodge, vision quest, yuwipi, keeping of the soul, making relatives, lowanpi, throwing of the ball, buffalo sing. Belief extends to medicinal practices that combine practical cures with spiritual inspiration, to hunting, and even to warfare. Interaction with family members is a sacred duty; children, the elderly, and the disabled are traditionally highly sacred personages and are to be reverently cared for. Treaties, especially the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 are considered sacred, as are certain geographical locations. The illegal confiscation of the Black Hills cannot be compensated for by the U.S. government’s offer of a monetary settlement; contemporary Lakota are to regain territory that is rightfully theirs, not because of its real-estate value but because of its spiritual meaning.

Participation in Lakota spirituality is increasing in visibility and number of participants as more and more

Lakota leave Christian denominations to return to Lakota practices or publicly combine both Lakota and Christian beliefs. The complex set of Lakota beliefs generally referred to as “traditional” stresses the connectedness of all reality and the importance of respect and generosity in dealing with a universe of relatives and relationships. At the same time, contemporary Lakota have inherited a daunting set of challenges including the traumatic legacy of nineteenth-century warfare; the loss of land and subsequent restriction to diminished reservation areas; forced assimilation and loss of language promoted by Church and state; and an increased population suffering from poverty, poor diet, new diseases, and alcoholism, with very little healthcare.

To address such challenges, Lakota spirituality incorporates not only rituals and prayer but also legal action by tribal agencies and grassroots groups dealing with sovereignty, environmental protection, forestry, water purity, and restoration of buffalo herds on reservation lands. Protests, political action, and alliances with individuals and groups who can assist them, provide an ongoing reinvigoration of Lakota spirituality and culture (elements which Lakota do not separate) on its path to wholeness. Today, the spiritual force of Lakota traditional practice combines with the pursuit of sound ecological practice to produce a sense of connectedness with and responsibility to a universe of interrelationships that should be honored and fulfilled with generosity. The goal of these interrelationships is summed up by the Lakota term *Wolakota*: to be in right relationship with all of creation. Through relationship the Lakota pursue a future of ecological integrity that is, at root, a spiritual endeavor to care for all relatives with generosity.

Mitauye Oyasin

Raymond A. Bucko

Further Reading

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See also: Bison Restoration and Native American Traditions; Black Elk; Indigenous Environmental Network; Indra’s Net; Holy Land in Native North America; Lakota Sun Dance.

SP Lakota Sun Dance

Lakota people gathering for the annual Sun Dance of the Wakpamni Lake community on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota would not be likely to say the words “nature,” “environment,” or “ecology.” These words would be perceived as terms belonging to the discourse of the dominant culture, and it would be routine for traditional Lakota people to suspect that such words would be employed to extend and maintain colonizing policies toward indigenous peoples and their plant and animal relatives. While Sun Dancers at Wakpamni clearly recognize that they are participating in a ceremony once belonging to nineteenth-century ancestors who lived as prosperous buffalo hunters on the northern plains, their participation in the Wakpamni Lake Sun Dance is no nostalgia trip, no reenactment of a once-glorious past. It is an intense engagement with the present in which their ancestral relatives such as the eagle nation and buffalo nation, along with the rock people and tree people, are fully interactive with the human community gathered for this renewal of life’s fundamental relationships. These contemporary-traditional Lakota people also know implicitly that the utilitarian ethos of the dominant culture, which is founded on the paired belief in individualist subjectivity and an objectified “natural” world, represents an outlook that is decidedly antithetical to the ceremonial meaning of Sun Dance. Therefore, Sun Dancing is an act of cultural and political resistance to the aggressive force of the dominant culture in the present moment, and it represents continuity with many past moments of such resistance.

The dominant North American culture perceives Lakota Sun Dancing as so utterly “other” that it serves as a primary signifier of an indigenous difference that is both exotically fascinating and fundamentally threatening.