Perspectives on Lakota world view

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PERSPECTIVES ON LAKOTA WORLD VIEW

by

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Fixing the Sacred Place: An Interpretation of the Preliminary Rite of Establishing the Site of the Sacred Lodge of the Northern Teton Lakota Sun Dance, Little Eagle, South Dakota Standing Rock Sioux 1977 to 1982

Our Other Selves: The Lakota Dream Experience and Concepts of Soul

The Role of Ritual in the Persistence and Continuation of the Oral Tradition Among the Contemporary Lakota: A Lakota Perspective

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Fixing the Sacred Place: An Interpretation of the Preliminary Rite of Establishing the Site of the Sacred Lodge of the Northern Teton Lakota Sun Dance, Little Eagle, South Dakota, Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, 1977 to 1982.

In former times the construction of the sacred area and places within the sacred lodge central to the performance of the Sun Dance Ceremony, took place over a series of days and through a series of rituals after the many bands and sub-bands of Lakota had gathered in one place. In present times because of subscription to the regulation of time into "work periods" and "weekends", the timing of the ceremony must take place within a designated time period to accommodate the lifestyle of the people who also travel great distances to their homelands and must return at designated times to be able to maintain their professional work status and means of survival. In light of these considerations... some of the actual preparations of the sacred place take place many days before the actual camp appears on the prairie.

As in most traditions the designated place is chosen with a great deal of consideration, for through the cumulative and successive acts, the Lakota will once again be able to realize the significance of all that is of this world and the other and where they stand in relationship to these.
Considering that as a Lakota, one is at once a micro-
cosmic reflection of the macrocosmic universe it behooves
him to continually attempt to be or become in concert with
the sacred rhythm of that which causes all life to move, or
be in a state of process. In doing so he is then assisting
or participating in the ongoing process of creation. Realizing
this, the making of the sacred place constitutes an entering
into a special relationship by those designated to do it, which
at best can be described as becoming instruments through which
the power of the sacred world will be funneled into this, the
temporal world, as re-creativeness through the breath and
hands of select people, thus joining the two worlds as one,
as it was in the mythic beginning of the Lakota world. These
people are those who have the "right" to "paint their hands
red." To the Lakota, these are the traditionally initiated
shamans and priests, those who at times become intercessors
on behalf of their fellow beings.

These select begin early emptying themselves of those
mundane and profane matters and activities that attest to
one's mere "humanness" or physical self. Through regular
periods of fasting and abstaining from sexual intercourse
it is believed it is their own sacred power, not necessarily
directly related to sexual prowess itself but to the regenera-
tive principle, the sicun, which is strengthened. That is,
the sacred energy of the gods is accumulated in one's actual
body and spiritual counterparts, the nagi and nagila. A
centering or focusing of sorts, comparable to that of a
magnifying glass focusing light rays to create fire, takes place, so that sacred acts may be accomplished - phenomenal transformations of the profane into sacredness.

Tantamount to this is a series of rites of purification in the sweatlodge; a ritual return to the beginning of the mythic and actual world; a rebirth and bringing of that initial and pure time to the present time and place.

The elements of the relationship of the body and spirit of man to the gods or their manifestations is seen in the comparison of one's body to the sacred pipe, itself a god-given instrument central to all rites of the Lakota. On one level it is said that one's body consists of the same basic material substances of the pipe. In configuration of parts there is also similarity. Like the pipe, the body too has a central axis and an upper spiritual realm where exists the internal and existential model of the universe which man consistently must strive to see exemplified in attempting to align himself with the external world about him if he is to realize the nature of being in its fullest dimensions. In one sense the realms that lie enclosed in one's mind can be figuratively compared to the zenith, or the upper realms in which dwell the superior gods which we, as mere humans, strive to know. We must not assume though that it is only in the head wherein these gods dwell, a very modern illusion. One needs only to realize that without the life giving forces of the sun, the atmosphere, the air wind and moisture, the physical presence of the external zenith, no mere human head, with
all its pseudo-profound ideas of self, could assume to exist. The Lakota extend the meaning of the zenith also to include the very origins of both the microcosm and the macrocosm. The middle realm of the configuration where the stem of the pipe is joined to the stone of the earth has its human counterpart in the human body also, for man as a biological being has his mind-zenith quite well attached to his frail, little body, a product of the earth. Together the two work, sometimes not always in harmony, but as a synthesis of the two principles of spirit and matter. For the Lakota, the reality of this awareness is the very foundation of Lakol Wicoha, a term with many dimensions ranging from "working for the people" to doing the proper thing as pertains to living a proper life according to what the Lakota deem essential and good. On another level it can be said to mean, in relation to the realization previously stated, all the ramifications of the word culture as we understand it to be in its academic definition. For the Lakota, then, man is both spirit and matter and to foster this condition, culture and serves the purpose of maintaining the relationship, and fulfills the destiny of what Lakol Wicoha prescribes for its own.

The lower realm or the stone-earth component reminds one of the tenuousness of the physical realm or that part of us which is deeply rooted in the chemical composition of the earth itself of which we are and from which we came as did
and do all things because of the mysterious interaction and synthesis of the powers of the zenith with the ever present and generous fecund and life transformational substances and invisible powers of the earth.

The Sacred Pipe and its teachings are a continual reminder, to those who use it, of this configuration and the significance inherent there, and as such becomes a central device to the rites of the Lakota which attempt to further illucidate and bring the participants closer to the deeper meaning of the principles of spirit or sacredness and the mystery of it all in the relationship of themselves to each other and to the rest of the world.

The pipe is also identified with the Sun Dance tree, simultaneously the axis of the universe, the top of which is both itself, the sun and the masculine principle. It too has a top and a middle, the crutch to which will be tied those offerings of man, tools by which they are able to create and maintain life as cultural beings and the ropes of sacrifice from which will flow the renewing creative energy of the god-tree-sun, attesting to their universal being and the meaning of sacrifice. Its base, too, is embedded in the earth, the female principle and foundation supporting and joining the other realms. During the ritual centering of the tree, in the southern Sioux tradition, a pipe is actually imbedded in a cavity inside the excavation, similar to, if not the same idea of, the sacrificial body of man through interment becoming one with all that is. In this case the pipe becomes the tree.
Returning to the original intent of this paper, it is said that proper preparation on the parts of the intercessors is of utmost importance for only purity can beget sacredness and sacrifice cannot be performed or attained without sacredness. An awareness of what is being done is deemed essential to bring about that sacredness.

On the appointed day, four purified priests with their materials or "sacred media" proceed to seek out the sacred place. All due consideration must be given to the realities of a physical setting, that is, being able to accommodate a circular camp of hundreds or thousands of people. There must be the availability of fuel, water, and nearness to where cottonwood trees grow and where there is an abundance of male sage the purifying herb. A vast plain or level ground with a relatively unobstructed horizon is considered best. In modern times, great pains have been taken to avoid sites where man-made structures are glaringly visable.

The priests carry with them a pointed cottonwood stake about three feet long; a portion of precious red cloth, antique Hudson's Bay trade cloth; sacred powdered paints, a pipe and smoking materials; sweet grass and sage for incense; a great length of cord, formerly of bison rawhide (a natural material and sine qua non as a manifestation of the "living cord" that connects us to the source of life); and eight tipi stakes for securing a tipi base. Today the living cord is made of deer hide a naturally available resource, and the stakes of choke cherry wood, the fruitfullness of the earth.
In recent times an area of virgin prairie has been sought, a place uncultivated. As these are becoming increasingly rare, places that have lain fallow for long periods of time are selected.

When an appropriate place has been selected after considering four potential places, a rite done each year and in a different place, the four priests walk toward what will be the central sacred place, singing warrior scouting songs or songs of the old warrior societies, particularly those that are designed to encourage bravery. They stop four times, the fourth time being at the exact place where the tree will eventually be placed. The four priests then sit down and face the west for a short period of silence.

They then proceed to talk and visit in a light hearted fashion discussing such issues people would discuss who have not seen each other for a long time, inquiring how their family members are, and jokingly teasing each other about old and new lovers; prefabricated sexual exploits, ribaldry, and gluttony. This seems to be a reversal of what they have actually been doing in preparation for the event. It also appears to be an enactment of chaos and the profanity of an unbridled gross life as compared to the sacred life and realm in which there is divine order, restraint and harmony. This may also refer to the prior mythic undifferentiated chaos which existed before the gods brought about the world as we know it and interjected into it the sacredness and harmony.
(law, equilibrium, the sanctified life, grace) that we strive to attain as beings who pray and enter into communion with the gods, according to prescription.

When this phase is finished, the actual ritual of making the place begins. The pipe is ritually filled to the singing of the pipe-filling-song:

Friend do it this way
Friend do it this way
Friend do it this way
Friend do it this way and all that you ask for will be given you
From this center where you stand with this sacred pipe make an offering send a voice from within to your grandfather and all that you ask for will be given you
Friend do it this way and all that you ask for will be given you.

As it is filled, each pinch of tobacco is first held over smoking and burning sage and then a smoking braid of sweet-grass, thus sanctifying it. Burning sage is to expel any evil influence, burning sweetgrass to infuse with positive power. Each pinch is offered to each of the directions, beginning to the west first, offering to and imploring the force or realm present there to be present in the pipe bowl, the center of the world. Tobacco is also offered to the above and to that which is below.

When the pipe is filled, it and its offerings are once again offered to each of the directions. Following this the formal prayer is made by one of the priests. The prayer is not only a request to the Lakota cosmos to become present here in this place, but also a lecture or telling of why
this is being done. The retelling of that portion of the Lakota mythology dealing with the beginning of the world and how it was created is done. How the four directions came to be is told. How mankind dwelt in the mythological underworld and how he and the bison, bear, and other animals were once one and the same is told. The story of the exodus from the spirit realm to earthly life is told. The story of the coming of the sacred pipe is told and how through it and its teachings man may once again realize the other world so that he may live in this one. It is then requested of the gods to sanctify mankind and this ground, for in this place will be made a sacred place where man will join himself with them and they may dwell together again for a little while. Together... gods and mankind will create the true world as it is so that man may enter the presence of the gods and the sacred reality which is true life and being.

Upon completion of the narrative, a knife is purified over the smoke of the sage and sweetgrass. Beginning at the west side of the place, before which the men are now seated in a circle, an incision is made and a small portion of sod is uplifted and placed to the west. The song of making the sacred place is being sung:

Four times to the earth I sent a voice (prayer)
A place I will prepare
Oh...people (tribe) behold!

This same song will be sung during the making of the sacred altar of the Sun Dance proper which is called the Unma Wiconi, the other world.
At each of the directions, sod is uplifted after feigning three times and completing the act on the fourth. Finally two pieces are lifted from the center. The cutter of the sod has previously painted his hands red and purified them over the smoke of the sage and sweetgrass. All the while the cutting is being done, one of the priests has been standing on the eastern side of the group, holding the pipe and praying audibly to each of the directions as each sod is lifted... imploring them to now be present here in this place. Finally, the remaining sod is lifted and placed to the west forming a small mound. Now revealed is a circle, about 16 inches in diameter, a little larger than the base of the tree which will be placed there. A circle of soft mellowed earth which is further softened and cleared of any remaining roots and plant particles will become the center of the world.

The cleared circle is smoothed and brushed with an eagle feather drawn from the back of the head of one of the priests. The priests then stop for a short rest period. They smoke not the ceremonial pipe but common small everyday smoking pipes or modern cigarettes.

The initial lifted sods at each of the directions would conceivably form a square if connected by lines, however, they are not. Instead, the sod is removed to form a circular mellowed earth shape. The mellowed earth altar of the Sun Dance proper, however, is in the shape of a square or rectangle with a circle divided into four quarters by a cross.
This writer is reluctant to be in total agreement with those who explain the square configuration as the passiveness of the earth. The Lakota seem not to believe that the earth conceives and gives birth passively. The constant interaction and volatile essence of the mother as matter and unci, or grandmother, as the sacred, invisible, living essence of matter...is a process. As a process they too are constantly in a state of flux i.e.: "even the stars, the sun and earth have life times." In this respect "nothing lasts forever" and one questions whether the earth can be symbolized as principal immutability. This may be related to the rediscovered nomadic orientation of the Lakota and their realization of the tenuous nature of physical existence - extended to the planet earth itself. Related to this is also the idea of the temporariness of this life, hence not embracing permanent structures.
The mythology tells us of the failure of mankind to remain responsive to the gods in some primordial time when they lived in permanent dwellings and harvested mysterious white fruit from gardens inbued by the gods but fell from grace despite the luxury provided by such a lifestyle.

After several hundred years of co-existence with foreigners, the Lakota sacred traditions have remained uninstitutionalized as "organized religion". Today, they formally and consciously do not embrace permanent sacred architecture as suitable or having any lasting significance as an expression of sacred ideals or places where gods or their powers may swell permanently.

The transparency of the world of matter and the transmutability—birth-lifetime-death—of all things, including the earth itself as a tenant of Lakota belief somehow prevented or prevents the evolution of thought on the permanence of matter as having very much to do with sacred space or place.

As it seems to be: by actually not being in a structure one is in the sacred temple—templus which is the world itself, with the actual dirt of the earth, the floor and the actual sky, the vast blue dome, the ceiling. One speculates that any material representation could potentially be a profanation of that which already exists in a sacred manner and is readily available around one, and really needs no or little replication or symbolizing.

Thus...once a year at the height of the living essence of the earth and sun, is the temple replete. The recreation of the world at this time appears visible in the temporary and non-reusable Sun Dance lodge and serves as
but a **momentary device** to assist man to realize that there is a sacred world and center, but that it is also everywhere, including inside himself.

One is moved to ponder that in Lakota "worldviewing" a square being without power or mutability makes it that very configuration which can be manipulated in so many hundreds of ways such as in quilled or beaded designs while the circle or cycle in its awesome potency and image of Wakan Tanka the all inclusive mystery needs no "devicive" inversion to express or teach of the immutability of the Wakan reality that is round and around and in all. While straightness may be related to the truth of the straight lines of a square which must be measured, the curve of the circle is related to the wisdom of the gods. Through discipline, a circle can be drawn by a person, the square is contrived. True wisdom is infinite and thus represented in a curve - a dot that begins a journey and expands but returns to its original position. The edges of a circle are always equidistant from the center - those of a square are not. Unity and equilibrium can be equated with being equidistant from a center.

The four directions of the world are of this world. For the Lakota, they are the intermediaries or forces which govern earthly existence and to understand the affects and their relationship to this life we are able to come to know the higher realities of the center from which they emanate and of which they are a manifestation. The mythology tells us they
were born of a god and a Pte woman, a primal form of human being. Anthropomorphically speaking they are the gradsons of the one above, their father having been the wind, an earthly manifestation of the one above, the source of an eventual return of all movement.

In an interesting phase of the middle world development one of the four winds as a being actually marries Woope, the beautiful one, conceived as a female god but become earthly as a messenger of how the new beings on the earth are to live. The term Woope is also the one used to define the concept of law, not in the sense of a written order which all must obey at the bidding of a higher authority but as natural law and custom as exemplified by the cycles of the seasons and the natural order of events to which the Lakota are beholden, indeed the actions of the Four Brothers, Tatuyetopa, as they fulfill their presence in this world.

If it is the four directions which give rise to the form we know as a square, then, for the Lakota it is certainly on a lower order of significance when compared to that of the circle, but nevertheless a part of it. The square is temporary; the circle is eternal.

After the priests have completed their rest period a short narrative explains the analogy of the pipe and the tree as it will appear, with one part of the crutch cut off to form a short extension. In the crutch itself will be placed the bundle containing the offerings, the lowly and earthly tools man uses to transform matter into life giving forms such as
knives for cutting, awls for sewing, arrows for killing game and hide tanning tools. Just as the pipe bowl is the place where the tobacco is placed and where fire, the same power of the sun is placed in stone - earth so that the inhaler sucks into himself the smoke (transformed essence of father-sun-fire; tobacco - all living things; mother-earth-stone) and joins it with his own breath and spirit, so is the tree the overt manifestation of the Wakan (sun-zenith impregnating earth, the generative principle exemplified) the very means by which man will draw into himself the life giving essence during sacrifice and physical joining of self to the tree-axis mundi - that which joins and is at the center of Wakan Tanka.

At this time the four directions are depicted on the mellowed earth altar by the drawing of lines to form a cross. Actually a line is made moving from the center and around the outside edge, into the center and back again to the edge at each of the directions, continuing around to the west and returning back to the center.
The maker thinks about and re-enacts in his mind that part of the mythology that traces the journey of the four sons of Tate, the wind, as they went about the edge of the world establishing the four directions and returning to their father's tipi at the center of the world, for their father, Tate, is an extension of the one above and one who can commune with the one above, originally having lived there but having come to the world that the world might be made more complete. Much like the role of Tate, the tree is an earthly manifestation by which we may commune with the gods and participate in the ongoing creation of the world, his sons being an extension of himself, part god, part earthly manifestation.

Tobacco is next placed in the grooves, thereby placing all living things on the world. Finally, precious red paint is placed in the grooves on top of the tobacco, imbuing the world with the hue of life, blood of the gods and man which speaks of sacrifice; tradition and order; the red way; a good red day in the world.

A priest then touches the pipe to the prepared stake and declares that these two are really one and the same and that this time is really the same time which will occur in the near future. The long cord is attached to the top of the stake along with the red cloth offering, the scarlet relic, our ancient ancestors who wave to us in the wind. The end of the pipe bowl is touched to the center of the mandala and then the pointed end of the stake is placed at its center and driven in firmly with a stone or stone hammer, the primal force and source of movement.
One of the priests then unrolls the cord as he walks to the west, stopping four times as he approaches a distance determined by his judgment of how large he thinks the diameter of the future lodge should be. He re-enacts in his mind the great Inyan, the original rock of the universe, the Tunkasila, which opened itself to release its blood which flowed and which he spread around himself in a great disc to form Maka, the earth. The diameter of the lodge is partially determined by the priest's knowledge of how many dancers have pledged and will be participating. Since the Lakota do not, if they ever did, place a roof on their sacred lodge, in modern times the diameter has been from eighty to one hundred feet. It is the same person to whom is entrusted the responsibility of overseeing the construction of the sacred lodge, many times in contemporary times doing much of the work himself or being assisted by relatives and members of his immediate family, including his wife and daughters. He has already been told, "You are a good man with many good children. You have always provided a good home for your children and a comfortable living. Together you and your wife have done what is proper in providing a good home where people are safe and happy. Today you will build a home for the people and Wakan Tanka." Indeed, the person is to be worthy of such qualities.

Lodgemaker also reflects on the mythical journey of the sons of Tate. As he approaches what will become the western edge and one of the entrances of the sacred lodge he stops
and drives two tent stakes into the ground, thereby creating the two sides of what will be one of four doorways to the sacred area. He makes a preliminary hole before driving in the stake on each side, into which he adds a pinch of tobacco first. He creates spaces (doorways) rather than walls, a signification that space (that which is invisible) is really something...much like the "somethingness" of the sacred reality which is more often than not, invisible. Lodgemaker then proceeds clockwise around the perimeter of what will be the lodge, using the cord as a means to establish the other three directions equidistant from the center.

So as to be in concert with the world as it will occur at or near the time of the summer solstice, the directions are not established as true according to the compass but rather in line with where the sun will rise and true with how the world really is at a specific time. Thus...as the sun rises on that day it will travel a sacred road into the east entrance of the sacred dwelling fashioned for it. Directly opposite this entrance and in the far rear or west side of the sacred lodge will be the fire without end, the power of the sun itself where the stones for the purification lodges will be heated. The distance of the fire from the west entrance of the sacred lodge is approximately the same as the diameter of the sacred lodge. An actual break in the wall of the sacred lodge will be provided on the west side so that the sunrise, the tree, the mellowed earth altar of the Sun Dance proper, and the fire will all be
directly aligned, each a manifestation of the Wakan all linked in their common energy, the very meaning of diameter.

Just as the lodgemaker has been able to make a good home for his own family, he exercises the same power to make a home for the gods...exercising a life giving ability from the temporal life now in a sacred fashion whereby the sacred life will be efficacious.

This preliminary ritual having been completed, the four priests gather their materials including the long cord, but leave the center and other stakes, and walk backward toward the east entrance, stopping four times and exiting through the invisible gate.

They then leave the area and return to their homes to continue further preparations. Before they leave, however, they sit at the east entrance and smoke the ceremonial pipe, offering prayers for good weather and the newly consecrated place with hope that it will remain unblemished by negative influences and free from those who might abuse it. In finality before leaving, a smoking piece of sweetgrass is walked around the outside perimeter of the sacred circle, incensing it and giving it an invisible sacred protection.

Upon their arrival at their homes or home the four men enter the purification lodge and cleanse themselves of the residue from having been to the sacred world, a recreated sanctuary. They then are ready to return to the mundane tasks of the profane world and to continue preparations for the days to come when at the designated time, the people will arrive in great numbers to celebrate having arrived at their
sacred center, still located in their ancestral land.
OUR OTHER SELVES:
The Lakota Dream Experience
And Concepts of Soul

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Black Elk told us:
I was four years old then, and I think it must have been the next summer that I first heard the voices. It was a happy summer and nothing was afraid, because in the Moon When the Ponies Shed [May] word came from the Wasichus that there would be peace, and that they would not use the road any more and that all the soldiers did go away and their towns were torn down; and in the Moon of Falling Leaves [November], they made a treaty with Red Cloud that said our country would be ours as long as grass should grow and water flow. You can see that it is not the grass and the water that have forgotten.

Maybe it was not this summer when I first heard the voices, but I think it was, because I know it was before I played with bows and arrows or rode a horse, and I was out playing alone when I heard them. It was like somebody calling me, and I thought it was my mother, but there was...
nobody there. This happened more than once, and always made me afraid, so that I ran home.

It was when I was five years old that my Grandfather made me a bow and some arrows. The grass was young and I was horseback. A thunder storm was coming from where the sun goes down, and just as I was riding into the woods along a creek, there was a kingbird sitting on a limb. This was not a dream, it happened. And I was going to shoot at the kingbird with the bow my Grandfather made, when the bird spoke and said: "The clouds all over are one-sided." Perhaps it meant that all the clouds were looking at me. And then it said: "Listen! A voice is calling you!" Then I looked up at the clouds, and two men were coming there, headfirst like arrows slanting down; and as they came, they sang a sacred song and the thunder was like drumming. I will sing it for you. The song and the drumming were like this:

"Behold, a sacred voice is calling you; All over the sky a sacred voice is calling."

I sat there gazing at them, and they were coming from the place where the giant lives [north]. But when they were very close to me, they wheeled about toward where the sun goes down, and suddenly they were geese. Then they were gone, and the rain came with a big wind and a roaring.
I did not tell this vision to any one. I liked to think about it, but I was afraid to tell it.*

Time and again, in the literature and in the oral tradition of the Lakota, references are made to visions, ghosts, and dreams. Specific differences are also made between the common dream—what modern research calls REM dreams—and what the Lakota believe to be the capacity to pierce a barrier and participate in another realm which is considered sacred.

To grasp the significance to Native people of the dream experience, one must take into account the unique stance from which they describe the metaphysical underpinnings of person and personality, not only of the human being but of all creatures, plants the world, and the universe.

Central to a host of beliefs connected with dreams and dreaming is the conviction of the transparency and mutability of all things. The mythologies of the tribes affirm for the Native the synchronous existence of various planes of reality in which both linear time and physical geography are only one level—one that consistently needs one's attention, for it appears to be incomplete and mutable, still in a process of ongoing creation. The other planes are the sacred counterparts of what we know to exist in the temporal world, but which are imbued with their own sacred power—often under the control of, or operative because of, the intervention of the gods.

Often, through the powerful language of metaphor, the

sacred world is delineated and anthropomorphized, a process by which the various dimensions of the personality of the Wakan (Great Mystery or gods) are made comprehensible and visible to the mind of the Native. This capacity of the Native mind to sustain the mythological presence of the transparent world, to integrate sacred time and geography with ordinary time and space, gives rise to a unique view of self in relation to all things and to others, including those who dwell in the sacred or "spirit" world, or as the Australian Natives call it, the "dreaming."

Attempts to delve deeper into the nature of the spirit world give one the idea that perhaps it is not for everyone to know, and that many people--Native Americans as well as others--who have been touched too deeply by technological and scientific modes of living and thinking cannot again recapture the capacity to operate in it. "Wondering about it" and listening to the tribal wise men sometimes gives us clues about the potential that is inherent in this capacity to live in both worlds; and yet only through the unique experience of witnessing the transformation of the contemporary practicing shamans do we get a glimpse of its awesome reality. It seems that the shamans are now still the vital link between the contemporary student of the phenomenon on one hand and the spiritual efficacy for the Native worshipper on the other.

Within the context of a specific tribal group, the Lakota wise men tell that "All things in the world are sacred. All things in the world in their order of creation were given
four spiritual counterparts besides the gross," or physical form which is the most obvious. All things were created first in the spirit world, and there they first learn and know that plane of existence, its language, and the gods who dwell there. Through a miraculous process of transubstantiation often depending upon the cooperation of living, earthly people through the fulfillment of ritual acts, entrance into earthly life is given to the four spiritual counterparts of all things, or as they will be referred to from now on, the four souls.

The first one to be considered is the Niya, which is described as the life-breath of a being. The word itself is derived from the Lakota woniya, which means the capacity of a being to breathe or possess living breath. This soul is very much a part of the body, for it is this that gives life to the organism, that causes it to live and to have its limited movement in the life process; it cannot move fully unless the other souls are also in harmony, in "working order." This is the basis of the importance of ritual preparation of foods; proper care and nourishment of the body is "to strengthen and keep strong the Niya"; physical activity is to keep the body attuned as an instrument by which life tasks can be accomplished. Ritual cleansing in the sweat lodge is thought not only good for expelling toxic matter, the miniwatutkala, through the pores, but also for strengthening and purifying the Niya through ritualized union with the spirit world. This is accomplished within the lodge through
song and communion utilizing the sacred pipe. The final act of the sweat lodge is the emergence from within to the outside—a ritual act of rebirth and rejuvenation witnessed by sighs of "How refreshing it was" or "Ah...I feel so light and good now." All rejoice and give thanks while sharing a ritual meal and feeling blessed to be able to breathe anew.

The ritual "doctoring" and healing processes, then, treat not only the body but also the Niya, a relation the modern world has begun to realize with the holistic approach to medicine. In this sense we see one dimension of the Lakota belief that dreams are explanations of medical realities. For if a person's Niya leaves his body, probably accompanied by the second soul or Nagi, and re-enters the spirit world, the body is quite without motion and the Niya must be retrieved and reintegrated with the body. While away, the Niya may once again dwell in the sacred world, dreamland, consorting with all kinds of other Niya and spirit-like beings. Following the regaining of this-world consciousness, a person who has been reintegrated has been known to report fantastic experiences to others who have kept a vigil near what to all appearances was a corpse, devoid of life-breath. It is this possibility of return and revival that gave rise to the Lakota tradition of above-ground burial and of keeping vigil with ritual feedings for a minimum of four days and nights. There are many old stories of a moving camp of Lakota passing a scaffold burial and being surprised by the moving and thrashing about of the supposed dead body, returned.
to life and trying to release itself from the tightly bound burial wrappings. When freed by the passing party, such "born again" people were said to have reported many things about the spirit world, or about "being away as in a dream," including having seen spirits of people long passed away.

A similar situation in recorded history is the phenomenon of the Ghost Dance of the Lakota in the 1890s. Numerous accounts, written and oral, tell of dancers, after long and exhausting periods of dancing, falling into trance-like states, "like being dead." Upon their regaining consciousness, without the aid of a shaman (for "no one was to touch them") they reported having seen their relatives and others who had died and a world full of peace and beauty, a restored world of primordial completeness.

The second soul, known as the Nagi, is closely akin to the stereotyped definition of ghosts as described in books, films, and oral tradition. Much more personal and individualistic than the Niya, the Nagi is much like a mirror image of the person's form, at once ephemeral when seen, transparent, and capable of easy transition to and from the spirit world. With its adeptness at mobility, the Nagi is thought to be capricious and sometimes a cause for concern when it is out of harmony with the form that it reflects. This can result in a type of soul loss or disequilibrium when it is absent from the body, but which is different from the loss of the Niya. If by chance the Nagi should leave and the Niya remain, the body would continue to function, but in
a state of coma or in semiconsciousness. In such a state the person may appear to others as strange in his or her actions and attitudes.

The concept of soul loss among the Lakota of the Northern Plains, however, has other ramifications as a matter of degree. While indeed the Nagi may wander it may also be merely out of kilter as a result of an organic situation. Aaron McGaffey Beede, an early reservation period chronicler of Lakota-Dakota life on the Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota, was a missionary, a philosopher, having studied for a Ph.D. at Berlin Kaiser Wilhelm University and eventually a lawyer-judge for Standing Rock. Having learned the Lakota language he proceeded to record and has left a rich legacy of information often overlooked in examining issues in Native metaphysics. Writing in 1918, he tells us:

As a boy, I read that Indians believed diseases to be caused by bad spirits in the diseased person and that the purpose of the pow-wow (healing ritual) was to exorcise such bad spirits.

I found the fact to be that the phrase taku-niun chichistina (something living little and of the Yanktonai dialect.) which has been translated "bad spirits" really meant particles that had been drunken in bad water or eaten in bad food, that is microbes of disease, and in the Indian conception, had no connection with spirits.

I found that the pow-wow, which has become an
ugly sounding word among white people, was called by Sioux Indians, wapiya which means to make whole and its purpose was to aid the mind in coming into full harmony with the All-Mind or The Great Spirit, thereby becoming released from the false idea of imaginary diseases, or strengthened while nature processes were working recovery from actual organic diseases.

Sioux Indians distinguished between actual organic diseases and imaginary diseases caused by hysteria which they called tawacin kaptan (the mind tipped over). I could relate scores of humorous or tragic scenes at point here. When they doctored me for typhoid, which is not common among Indians, they knew well that I had organic disease and they treated me with this in mind.

In many cases the temporary absence of the Nagi is cause for illness or insanity. It is believed that the Nagi retains the idiosyncrasies of the this-worldly nature of the personality, and hence can be capricious and unpredictable, reliable or benevolent, depending on the nature of the person or the being. So it is that it may linger or be projected near the temporal world and be seen on occasion by those with the capacity to see it. Or it may migrate deeper into the spirit realm, where it may have to be retrieved through the shaman's art and his ability to make contact with it, or with his own intercessors who contact it and attempt to lure it back or to rejoin it with the body.
Beede tells us of another situation in which the Naqi in its anxiety to be in one place, but restricted by temporal affairs, was perceived and accepted as matter of fact, as if the situation were commonplace. In a letter of January 27, 1923, he says:

Dear Dr. Libby,

I have a tremendous run of law practice just now together with many letters. . .but will gladly take time for attempting to answer your letter as to the Indian psychological idea of the "other self." Of course all human characteristics in all races are similar, though some that are small in one people seem to be large in others, and the differences, notwithstanding the similarities are vitally important. One must be with Indians intimately in order to feel their peculiar psychology, and if one comes to feel it. . .how so then to express it in the foreign terms of the Whiteman as to convey the meaning to the one who has not felt it.

. . .up on my claim in the Turtle Mountains. . .an Indian was wintering beside me. His boy, John, about eighteen years old, was in Canada. I had never seen him. As he and I were going down to Laureal with a load of wood, sitting side by side, and were about a half mile from our log houses, suddenly he said, "Huh. . .there is John," and immediately stopped the team and threw the lines to me. He went ahead of the sleds about ten rods
to shake hands with John and to embrace him Indian style. As he came just to him he disappeared. I saw him plainly and his near new overcoat and cap. In delight he ran back to his log house to tell John's mother about it, for it meant that John was on his way home, and that his "other self" had outsped him in his ardent desire to get home and had appeared as we saw him.

Two days later John arrived and he wore the same new overcoat and cap which I had seen on the "other self." Such things as this were not uncommon in old times among Chippewas and Sioux... I have known.

When one is in this state he is wakan, sacred, or holy and any old Indian would befriend such a wakan person in all possible ways. In a vastly different phase of this matter, [when] the "other self" expands [it] nearly leaves the body, which becomes rigid and almost senseless and travels over great distances, even to "the home of the Great Spirit" or into the "other world," the unma wiconi. (Unma wiconi is also a term used to indicate the life which is yet to come, but which has always been.)

Among the Lakota there are those who at a very young age exhibit a pre-knowledge of the world and of customs or persons long passed away. Such a person is said to be the explicit and individual Nagi of one who has lived before, returning in another body to participate again in the earthly
life. This is frequently believed of twins and of certain shamans with their sacred and often mysterious ability to comprehend what ordinarily appears illusive to others. Such people when meeting for the first time, will often have feelings of inordinate familiarity with each other, as if recognizing their strange commonalty.

A case in which I was a witness took place several years ago at a Lakota Sundance in northern South Dakota. A middle aged couple appeared in the camp of the head intercessor, who was exhausted and suffering from the rigors of the ceremony, asking him to come and see their daughter. I went with him and the parents to their camp. The daughter, who appeared to be ten or twelve years old, was dressed in conservative old fashioned clothes more suitable to a grandmother than to a young girl of the present time. She talked to the shaman alone, with downcast eyes, in a polite and almost inaudible voice. Then she opened a small bundle and handed him water and food including a piece of melon, which is a preferred food after long periods of fasting and dancing in the heat of the Dakota sun.

Later the shaman explained that this girl was believed by her family to have lived before. On this day she had identified him with all his birthmarks, scars, and other physical characteristics as someone she recognized from her previous life. A year before, the shaman had had extensive surgery and bore a great scar on his abdomen. The girl explained to him that in her previous life, she and her husband...
had been through a terrible battle with enemies resulting in her husband's suffering similar if not identical scars and wounds from which he eventually died.

She had insisted that her parents bring her by car many miles to this Sundance because she had dreamed the night before that she saw her husband from her previous life dancing and suffering and in need of refreshment.

The shaman himself took all this matter-of-factly and had treated her with all the respect Lakota etiquette demands of the younger meeting the elderly, although at this point in time he himself was the elder and could indeed have been her grandfather.

Arising from these beliefs are the rituals for putting the Nagi in contact with the spirit world to gain insight, vision, and strength. The Lakota still believe firmly in the efficacy of the vision quest, a ritual fasting and sacrifice through which contact is made with the dream world and the spirit-selves of the other realm.

Since all creatures possess Nagi, they are able to commune with the Wica-nagi or spirits of men and women in the language all Nagi learned in the spirit world. It is, therefore, not uncommon that the spirit visitor to the man seeking a vision on his isolated hilltop is that of any of the Nagi of people, animals, or birds believed to possess special god-like powers originating in the other world.

The term Hanbleceya is usually translated as "crying for a dream." A deeper meaning hidden in the word's roots suggests a standing and enduring. The ceya--crying or
suffering—indicates the need for sacrifice, which appears in the ritual of the vision quest as the giving up of water, food, and protection from the elements. In the process of sacrifice, sacer facere, to make sacred, one is ritually denying the physical existence of the mundane world in order to reach into or experience the sacred world by numbing the senses required for ordinary life. For the Lakota, to sacrifice is to ritually transform physical substance into spiritual substance, and in doing so, to transcend the gross in order to reach the greater reality of non-pain and the non-suffering, non-physical parameters of being. In the spirit world—dream time—all becomes possible. There, if the quester has a good heart and a pure mind, the dream beings may reward him or her with special powers which can be activated and translated into means of attaining harmony and balance between the spiritual and the mundane.

This brings us to the third aspect of soul or manifestation of spiritlike principle. The wise men tell us again, "All things possess a special power of their own which can be added to, expanded, and utilized to help others and themselves." The Sicun is that mysterious spiritlike power which all things possess. For the plant it may be its life-giving fruits, seeds, leaves, or roots or their chemical results as medicines. For animals it may be their unique traits, or the knowledge they have of plants or of celestial and earthly phenomena or behavior, that man desires for himself to help him survive. In some animals, it is their possession of the eternal and unfettered wisdom of the gods.
which man desires to know. This can only be communicated while in the state of Nagi, transported and placed over the ritually prepared sacred area where the suppliant stands, or in a magical flight from that place where the Nagi of the seeker enters upon a mystical journey to that other world and returns, as in a waking dream to reinhabit his original body, now weak with hunger, thirst, and weariness.

While in the other realm, the encounter might have been a most dramatic affair endowed with all the trappings of a pageant, or as a solitary meeting with an old friend. Emerging nonetheless, whatever the form, the Nagi of the seeker is offered a portion of the Sicun of his spirit visitor, and instructed about its use and about the ritual songs, dances, or prayers to be utilized in activating it once he returns to the ordinary world.

It is just such Sicun that is contained in sacred bundles, stones, or animal parts worn or used by the shaman, warrior, or Native doctor in the ceremonies and rituals designed to make life efficacious.

As such, it can be said that some people possess more Sicun than others, or that some have fostered their Sicun well and have thus continued to insure its potency. While all things possess Sicun, those who have received more of it by crying for a dream are supposed to be particularly blessed and hence responsible that it will always be used for the benefit it can bring to the people so that the proper relationship of all life will be maintained.
Relationship and harmony form the foundation upon which the fourth soul lives in all things. The Lakota conceive of Taku Skan Skan, or that which moves and causes all of life to move or to live, as though the entire universe were injected or infused with a common source and type of cosmic energy. This which causes all movement was the original source of all things at the beginning, says our mythology. From it came all of the energy of life, ranging from that of the stars, sun, and earth to that which causes the tiniest insect to move about and know its rhythm and part in the scheme of things. This Taku Skan Skan in all things is referred to as the Nagila, or little ghost that dwells in everything. Less personal and more magnanimous than the other souls, the Nagila is responsible for wholeness—much like the web or sacred cord that binds and holds together all components. It is a bit of the divine essence—the mysterious force that makes all things and beings relatives to each other and to their common ancestor.

The profundity of this realization is expressed in the shortest and most commonly expressed Lakota prayer as a total response in ritual situations or as an ending to a longer narrative prayer. That prayer is mitakuye oyasin, "all my relatives" or "I am related to all that is."

Realizing, then, that one is more than mere physical being, the possibility for interaction, transaction, and intercourse within other dimensions of time, place, and being is what the dream experience is to the Lakota: an alternative avenue to knowing.
When Black Elk and others tell us of their great visions and subsequent excursions into the sacred realms, we are compelled to believe that something greater happened than "a train of thoughts or images passing through the mind in sleep," as the dictionary tells us,* or "... expression during sleep of various aspects of the ego and super-ego typically withdrawn from consciousness but, when recorded and analyzed, having some value in the diagnosis, interpretation and treatment of certain maladjustments of the personality."

The importance of the Lakota belief about dreams is not just a memory contained in accounts by such men as Black Elk. Today, and perhaps at this very moment, traditional activities are taking place on contemporary reservations. Legitimate shamans and healers regularly maintain a schedule of clients whose requests range from dream interpretation to the rectifying of personal disequilibrium to the ritual preparation and strengthening of soul for future participation in the spring and summer high ceremonies. These include the contemporary Sundance and Hanbleceya with all their attendant rites for encountering the sacred world, from which will come that "stuff" of ethnicity that causes the Lakota to persist as tribal people in a twentieth century society.

It is not uncommon for professionally educated and employed Lakota living in urban centers to travel great distances, leaving behind the ways of contemporary life to participate in the mysterious, in the tribally prescribed

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mode. Often this is because they are still beckoned by the dream encounter that moves them to do as the messenger instructs them.

This should give us insight into and respect for the diversity and uniqueness of humankind's ability to participate in and explore the inner and outer landscapes of mind and myth, where truth abideth in many guises.
THE ROLE OF RITUAL IN THE PERSISTENCE AND CONTINUATION
OF THE ORAL TRADITION AMONG THE CONTEMPORARY
LAKOTA: A LAKOTA PERSPECTIVE

Arthur Amiotte
May 31, 1983
The Role of Ritual in the Persistence and Continuation of the
Oral Tradition Among the Contemporary Lakota: A Lakota Perspective

On most reservations of the Northern Plains, many gradual
intra-tribal changes are taking place as these cultures con­
tinue, indeed as they always have, to redefine themselves in
light of the environment and the forces inherent there as
congruence with the modern world has become less and less
avoidable. Some times these adaptations were and are by the
choice of the Natives themselves but more often than not it
represents yielding to the omnipresence of the powerful in-
fluences of the would-be-civilizers.

Volumes have already been and have yet to be written
about the implications of the social, economic, governance
and educational evolution of these peoples as they have
adapted so far. Each of these is crucial to the survival of
these, the indigineous Americans as the indigineous peoples
of this continent if this is a concern now as it rarely has
been in the annals of the history of the non-Indian presence
in this land.

With exception to the national ideals of the conquer-
ing wave there has always been that minority of those, Indians
and non-Indians with broader visions of what the quality of
the human experience must be. As has always been true of this
minority in the history of man, they have not always been the
ones or at least for any long duration of time, meaning for

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hundreds or thousands of years, to mold those visions into a modus operandi free from the oppression of one race upon another. It seems that only now since the potency of modern technology has shrunken the world to fit into the size of a television screen, that so many people all over the world now have a nagging yet mysterious longing for something beyond what was promised and indeed wrought as temporal comforts in a material world, a world numbed to those alternative visions rooted in the primal experience for so long now, relegated to either the attics or cellars of modern minds.

As many Northern Plains Indian communities take on the overt trappings of what at first appear to be "outer suburbia" we are at once struck with the impression that the people have "finally become White." To visit any of numerous contemporary social institutions such as educational classrooms we might at first also be convinced that "finally these people are on the right track." When a young school age child recites the major holidays as: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day and finally the major summer holiday as Sun Dance we realize that among all this change that those Indian people with a broader vision might still be existent here also.

The alternate vision of the human experience mentioned previously consists, for the Native, of those dimensions, principles and traits of Religious Man, those who are able to see beyond the immediacy of the material and persist because of the admonitions inherent in the tribal teachings which tell
of the necessity to always be cognizant of the ancient gods and their wills if one is to be what humans really are.

The themes or principles have through time been variously isolated as modes of doing and believing centering around the value of relationship not only to each other as people but to all aspects of life extending into and beyond temporal time, physical geography and the scientific vagaries of life as mere protoplasm. The theme of transmission of these beliefs is also of great concern because of the very nature of the beliefs which are ancient and universal yet tempered and made comprehensible by the cultural oral tradition; metaphor; ritual and modes of behaving in a day to day experiential complex of patterns which insures integration and incorporation of the beliefs into an efficacious whole.

While the actual process of cultural continuation of the beliefs can be reduced to numerous models I have chosen instead to present a series of tellings which illustrate some of the cultural dimensions of the process which ordinarily would be lost in reducing the process to a mere pseudo-scientific observation.

When I was six years old I killed my first bird. My Grandmother and Step-Grandfather made a feast for me. They invited people from White Horse Creek: Henry Weasel and his wife Lucy; John and Mary Bear Shield; Alex Pablo, one of my own Grandfather's good friends; the Red Elks and Frank and Mary Black Tail Deer. When I was fifteen, Mary Black Tail...
Deer said, "Hmmm...He has turned into such a handsome young frog," a quite adequate description of an out-of-proportion, late-blooming adolescent.

My Grandmother cooked the little bird all by itself in a tiny little pan, the same one in which the first kill of my Uncles had been cooked. In addition to this she also cooked much more than the guests could ever eat at one setting.

Once the people had gathered, Frank Black Tail Deer stood up and made a long speech in place of my own Grandfather who had died when my mother was five years old, many years before I was born. Frank Black Tail Deer had also been one of my Grandfather's good friends. He told the people that I was now a little man and that life was going to change because I now had to go to school. His wife, Mary then handed him a muslin bundle which had been made from many little Bull Durham sacks ripped open and sewn together again to form a larger bag.

From this bundle he took a furry little "something" which when opened turned out to be a little cap made of beaver fur. It had little beaded ears on it and two shiny beads on the front for eyes. He told me this cap had belonged to my Grandfather. Then he gave me good advice, reminding me always to be kind to and remember the old and hungry people. He told me to always remember the Tunkasilas (the Lakota Gods) and to do what my parents told me to do and not to be stingey.
He said that now that I was going to school, I would need some special help. Giving me the cap he said, "Remember it is the beaver who can make a whole world. In doing so he gives a place for all creatures to come and live. Now that you are going to school you will be making the world all over again and you should do it in a good way so your relatives will be proud of you."

Years later reflecting on this I realized what he was talking about, for in building a dam in some locations the beaver actually does create a world, a miniature lake with its ecosystem to which many animals could come and drink, from which could arise new and lush flora. Birds from the sky could float in the water, eat from it and nest near it. Insects could proliferate and other small creatures could abound.

Mary Black Tail Deer then opened her shawl and pulled out another bundle from which she took a little patchwork pillow. She said it was filled with goose down and, "Takoja, (grandchild) you use this for a long time to rest your head because learning will make you tired sometime. Some of what you learn will be stored here, like a dream sack."

Everyone then ate a little pinch of the cooked bird I had killed. I was embarrassed but my Grandmother made me pass it around to them. As each took their little portion they thanked me politely in Lakota, some of them even passed
their hand before my face in a down stroke, an ancient and the most sincere sign of gratitude. The larger meal was then served to them, and the extra food was packed away in used metal lard buckets and little bundles which they had brought especially for this occasion.

My grandmother then opened one of her trunks and pulled forth shawls, patchwork quilt tops and yardages of calico, silk scarves and pieces of new tanned deer skin cut in the shape of moccasin tops before they are sewn to the rawhide sole. These she handed out to the ladies. My Step-Grandfather, who by biological kinship was the uncle of my own Grandfather, gave the men cartons of Bull Durham tobacco, silver dollars, black silk neck scarves and to Frank Black Tail Deer, for his part in the event, a half of the beef when we next butchered in about two weeks.

Frank Black Tail Deer then stood and without a drum, sang an honoring song for me in which he used my childhood Lakota name, Wahpa Tanka Kuciyela, Low Flying Blackbird. It had formerly belonged to my Grandfather, his Grandfather and the Grandfather before him. It was given me at birth and was part of my inheritance. Everyone arose and one by one came and shook my hand while he sang. Then everyone left and I hauled water in buckets from the spring so my Grandmother could wash the dishes. My Step-Grandfather went back to work in the field with his horsedrawn hay rake.
I still have that pillow today and it is very hard and flat because it is now so very old. I know for sure it also has a few nightmares stored in it. The lesson of the cap was well taken because several days later, much against my wishes my Grandfather and Grandmother took me in the wagon to school. There I was given over, I felt abandoned, to a very scary looking, red haired, freckled White woman teacher who treated me well.

At story telling time she would say, "Okay children, let's put on our thinking caps." I knew precisely what she meant because I owned such a cap, even though I did not actually have it there with me. In my imagination I would reach inside the white sack it came in, and put it on my head. I just knew I was learning well, much and faster by wearing that imaginary beaver cap.

At home in the evenings the Grandfather and Grandmother would tell the Iktomi stories, the Lakota trickster tales. Into late Autumn, sometimes even after the first frost we continued to sleep in a large green army tent in which there were numerous beds including those of the grandparents. Other adults and the very young cousins slept inside the house. Once tucked in our beds under heavy patchwork quilts, the kerosene lantern was turned down to low light and the stories began. I would reach under my pillow and put on my beaver cap and pull it over my eyes so I could not see anything. As the Iktomi stories were told and also other stories of long
ago, the scenes would come alive inside my head. Sometimes the Grandparents would orally take the roles of the various characters and with their voices bring to life the mythic and historical dramas they were reliving for the benefit of their grandchildren. Many times the stories wove themselves into my dreams until someone, usually my Grandmother, removed my beaver cap before she finally retired so that I might not smother in my sleep.

Let us then return to another story telling in the 1940s and early 1950s. Grandmother said whenever Standing Bear killed and butchered a beef he stood atop a nearby knoll within hearing distance of his neighbors in the new reservation setting and sang songs of invitation to his old friends from the pre-reservation days including Black Elk; the parents of Frank Black Tail Deer; the father of the Red Elks and others. Upon their arrival a good feast of fresh meat and tripe was prepared and a long evening of smoking the pipe and reliving the olden days would take place with everyone sitting on the floor, fully with the intention of staying all night, as the existing furniture was pushed back against the walls of the then contemporary log house, and beds were made to accommodate those who wished to retire early as was expected of one of the old men's wives who through the entire event made everyone, to the embarrassment of her husband, a once prominent warrior, very uncomfortable by her physical signs of boredom and bad manners until she finally retired so history could stay awake. This scene continued long after Grandmother
married and bore her children and continued on in the household. One of the amusing aspects of the continuing tradition was the great restraint with which Standing Bear's grandchildren, my uncles, aunts, and mother, had to conduct themselves around the perimeter of the group while observing and listening with all due respect but not quite being able to contain themselves at the mention of terms of address these old grizzled warriors used when addressing or mentioning each other in the course of the night-long narratives.

They used their secret names openly as address because by this time in their lives they had given away their warrior names or vision names to their grandchildren and had nothing left but the name intended to cause them to live to be old men. Such names were historically bestowed upon the very young by request of the parents, of the camp berdache and were of a usually obscene nature, rarely mentioned during the lifetime of an individual while an active warrior but which became commonplace long after prestige, age and the nobility of old age had been bestowed upon the wearer of such nomenclature. By then, such a name might even be considered a compliment considering the capabilities or inabilities often attributed to the aging process.

Standing Bear, the host was Grandmother's father. Born in 1856, he had participated in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and numerous other exploits of Plains life prior to the establishment of the reservation. As an artist he had made numerous skin and muslin paintings in the old pictographic style telling of his own warrior deeds and sometimes the deeds of those, for those who were less adept at drawing and painting. In the thirties he was commissioned by John Neihardt
to do the paintings for the well known book, *Black Elk Speaks*.

The following is an edited and abbreviated rendition of evening long tales told in response to a question concerning Lakota names and how they were decided upon by those who gave them. While the story is about Standing Bear as a young man it was retold by the Grandmother years later, after she had heard it told in the previously mentioned setting as a young girl and also later by her and her own children in the same setting, from her father. Now, many years later and possibly for the fifth or sixth time, she was telling it to her grandchildren long after their great-grandfather had passed away. Parenthesis are the authors.

My father was a good and brave man. When I was young I used to make the horse hoof prints on his shirt and leggings after Mamma had finished beading them. Oh...she would get so mad at him when he would give them away, especially that time when old man Plenty Coups from Crow Agency came and stayed with us that one Fourth of July. Your Aunt Rosie (my mother's eldest sister) was a little girl then and she was picked to count coup on him before the feast and dancing started. Even though it was a new time we still didn't know what to think of those Kangi Wicasa, (Crow Indians).

She took the staff and was told to hit him just a little bit on the shoulder but she took it instead and really hit him hard on the head and then ran away. Plenty Coups didn't get mad he just thought
it was funny but my father took off his new shirt, leggings and headdress and gave them to him as if they didn't mean anything to him. Mamma and I had just finished them for him too, but she thought your Aunt Rosie had done the right thing even though all Indians were now finished fighting each other.

The next year when my Father and Mamma went to Crow Agency they came back with a new wagon, horses and lots of Navajo blankets for us girls and our Uncilas (little Grandmothers, Standing Bear's aunts and female cousins). They also brought sewn sacks of dried cherries and buffalo berries. They make their buffalo berries with flour and sugar mixed in them before they are dried into patties.

Those little horse hoofprints on his shirt are the five times he went zuya (war path or horse stealing raids against the enemy). One time long ago he and his friends went to steal horses from the Crows. As they left that time he wore his Red Hawk. It was his wotawe (war medicine) before the time he got the Bear Medicine. He always took his Red Hawk because they (the spirit helpers) told him it would help him. He used to put it on his shield but I don't know what ever happened to it (the shield). It used to be in the back house.
(a small storage house separate from the main house for certain items, including sacred objects) but I know we didn't bury it with him. Maybe one of those wasicus (white persons) took it. They were always coming around and having him draw things for them on muslin. Sometimes they paid him and sometimes he just gave it away. Mamma used to get so mad at him when he would do that but he didn't care.

They were going and they were going until finally they reached where the Crows lived. He told his Red Hawk that if he was successful he would give cuts on his arms at the next Sundance. His friends also prayed with the pipe for a safe return.

Sure enough they got away with some good horses, but My Father had to kill one of those Crows because he kept coming right after them. They took his scalp and brought it with them.

They came and came for days until one morning they woke up and there was a fog which was everywhere and it was so thick they didn't know where they were. They went one way for a while and didn't recognize the place so they went the other way for a while until after a whole day they were finally lost. The scalp they had, kept getting heavier and heavier until finally they had to cut a piece of it off but it still kept getting heavier. Finally they had it on a pole between two of them and were carrying it that way.
They still could not find their way and it was getting dark. They also were getting thirsty and knew their horses needed water if they were ever to get back to the people. By now it was getting dark so they decided to make camp. So...they did.

Some of the men thought that it was the scalp that was causing the fog. Maybe that Crow was a Wakan man and had a power to cause the fog, but they were keeping it anyway. That night they prayed with the pipe and asked the Tunkasilas (gods) to show them the way and also mentioned the promises they made to do something at the next Sun Dance.

Sometime during that night my Father had a dream which was real. Early the next day the dream was still with him and as he was waking up there were these two little birds sitting on a little bush close to where he was lying. Those two little birds were talking about him and his friends. They were saying, "Should we tell them?" One said, "No we shouldn't tell them." Then the other said, "They did pray for help." Then the other one said, "Huh...but they still have that scalp." Finally one of the birds motioned to My Father, and said, "You Kola! Give up that scalp and we will show you the way from this place. The Kangi Wicasa you have wants
to return to his people and that is why he is doing this to you. His people are crying for him so let him go. They are Crows so they have strong tears. You let him go and we will show you the way."

My father said, "Huh, go ahead and have him then." Those birds then told him what landmarks to follow in the fog and how to reach a certain spring near a stand of trees by a certain butte. When everyone woke up My Father told them what happened and they said they should do that, but oh... they didn't want to give up the scalp because now their relatives wouldn't have anything to dance with when they finally got home. They finally said, "Oh well, the horses we got should be good enough."

They followed the birds' instructions and finally after some more days, finally found their way home and everyone was glad. That is why My Father had seventy-five scars on each of his arms. Just one of those beaded horse hoofprints means this story.

They said when I was born My Father made a feast and told the people this story and said my name was to be Zitkala Nunpa Win, Two Bird Woman. I'm supposed to help people find their way. We wear a name and it helps us to be what that name means. My Father changed his name when he received the Bear Medicine. It (the Bear) stood up and came
dancing to him on its hind legs. It hugged him and rubbed him where he was hurt. Since then we have that medicine.

When I was growing up nobody ever called me by this name until that time Old Man Yellow Horse made the Hunka ceremony for us girls (her and her two sisters). I must have been about six years old. We were closed inside the tipi waiting for them to come and get us out. My Father tied a horse in front of the door and that old man who told about the time he did the Hunka for his children also told everyone the stories of our names. Lilly and Hattie (her two older sisters) have stories about their names too. When the old man told the stories of our names our Uncilas would make the tremelo whenever our Father would do brave things in the stories of our names. When the old man was finally through telling things we could come out into the open. We each had a corn painted blue on a stick which we had to carry. Old Man Yellow Horse carried me on his back but my sisters had to walk because they were bigger than me.

We went from that place to another tipi where the buffalo head and the people were sitting around. Joe Yellow Horse then told us a story about long, long, long ago.
"Mitakuyepi, Ehaaaaani, there was an old woman and an old man who lived far away. All their lives they wanted to have children of their own but they never had any. Everyday they made Inikaga (the sweatlodge or purification rite) and asked the Tunkasilas (the gods) to send them a child to care for them because they were now becoming old and needed help. Year after year they prayed for a child until one time the spirits in the Inikaga told them, 'You have been faithful to us in your desire to have a child, even though you are so old, you never gave up. In time something good will come to you. Have faith in your prayers.' Oh...the old man and the old woman were so happy. Each day they hoped for a change in their life but nothing happened. By and By they were starting to get anxious.

One evening they heard a loud roaring sound that whistled as it got closer to them until it was very loud. Finally a bright light flashed through the opening of the tipi smoke hole and appeared to land right outside their door. They were very scared. The next day they went outside but didn't notice anything different so they went to their sweat lodge to ask the spirits what had happened. They were told to be patient because their wish had been fulfilled. Oh...they were so happy.
On the next day, right in front of their door, they noticed a strange little plant had sprouted. It did not look like any plant they knew so they avoided stepping on it and even began to care for it since it was so unusual, thinking all the while that it wasn't what they asked for but since it was so strange maybe it was Wakan and this is what the gods had intended.

Putting all doubts aside and trusting in the message of the spirits they continued to care for it, loosen the dirt around it and watering it to help it grow. In time it grew into a fine straight plant with lovely long leaves around a single stem. As it grew taller it finally grew a long little head with nice silky hair which the old lady cared for with all the adoration she would give a baby.

One morning very early as the old man and woman were preparing to get up they heard a strange sound like a baby crying. They jumped up from their beds and hurried to the door. Opening it, they saw a naked little baby boy lying where the plant used to be but was now gone. Then they knew the gods had been true to their word. This old man and woman were not like we are today. They knew some secrets so they brought the baby inside and wrapped him in the fine things the old woman had made in expectation.
of someday having a baby. Standing in the catku (the place of honor, the place opposite the door, the west side of the interior of the tipi) they threw the baby up and out the smoke hole. Going outside and picking him up he had instantly grown into a little boy. They took him inside, dressed him up again in little boy's clothes and stood in the woman's place (the north side of the tipi interior) and threw him up and out the smoke hole again. This time when they went out to get him he was almost ready to become a young man. They did this two more times, moving around to the east and south sides (of the tipi interior) before they threw him up and out the smoke hole. The last time was very hard because he grew so much but they were doing something very wakan so they were able to do it.

The last time he was finally fully grown and came in and called them Ina (Mother) and Ate (Father). From then on he cared for them and they for him and they have been living that way ever since because they believed what the Tunkasilas told them.

Hau! Mihunkayapi, Hau! Mihunkayapi! Always remember this story.

Some other old man then tried to give us girls each a drink of water from a wooden bowl with pahin (porcupine quill work) around the edge. Lilly had
a beaded tin cup and Hattie one of Mamma's glass bowls. Each time we almost drank it Joe Yellow Horse said he was thirsty so the old man gave our drinks to him instead. They tried to give us a bite of fat wakablapi (thin dried meat sometimes called Jerky) but gave it to Joe Yellow Horse again because he said he was hungry. Finally our Father and Mamma started to put a beaded shirt and hunska (leggings) and "beaver blankets" and "Navajos" (Pendleton blankets were called beaver blankets because of the labels of the Pendleton Woolen Mills of Pendleton, Oregon, which to this day say Beaver State. "Navajos" refer to the Navajo hand woven blankets popular at the time among the Northern Plains tribes which today are referred to as Chief's Blankets) over our backs. Just when we thought we would be able to keep these nice things Joe Yellow Horse said he was cold. We couldn't believe this because it was so hot, but they took them off us and gave them to him instead. We didn't know what to think. Finally he said to us, "Hau! Mihunkayapi, each one of you has done as a good Hunka should do. You have taken water from yourselves when you were thirsty and gave it to someone else who was thirsty. You took both fat meat and lean and gave it to someone who was hungry. You took the
clothes from your backs and gave them to someone who was without. Remember this always! Even if a poor hungry dog comes to your doorway in times to come and you have still in your mouth your last piece of bread, take it out and feed that poor dog. Some day if a poor person comes to your house and you don't even have any food, at least give them water to drink. As long as you do things in this way you will always be blessed and have much in your lives. If you remember to always do these things you will never be without food and the things you need in your life. If you ever forget these important things then all your blessings will be like ashes in your mouth and there will be no one to care for you in your old age. You will live to be very old if you remember all these things.

Returning then to the implications of all of this to the persistence of the oral tradition among contemporary Native Americans we are able to see that it hinges upon much more than someone telling stories for entertainment even though such stories have such a capacity. It includes numerous mention of objects, songs, prayers and the calling upon from deep within themselves almost super-human types of understandings and acts of ultimate belief in mysteries at once as unfathomable at that time as they appear to be at this time.
The important lesson inherent in these tellings is that the participants proceeded to test their faith in such mysteries and lived to tell in subsequent narratives the efficacy of their great faith.

To understand something of the story telling traditions of the Native American one must understand that the stories are not mere random tales from some eclectic collection remembered by old people. They are a part of a larger body of lore not memorized in the sense that one consciously commits them to memory as we have sometimes had to do in the classroom, but incorporated into the very psyches of generations of listeners through repeated listenings and tellings in settings conducive to an almost group-like mesmerizing or lolling in which the very rhythm or cadence is an actual ingredient in the process of absorbing the spoken message. The body of myth is certainly not without its parts: ie. sense of time and place; style; conflict; levels of sophistication of expression; abstractness and truth.

Natives, well aware of the various dimensions of the mythic tradition, have not been remiss in categorizing the various levels out of respect for: the sacredness inherent in certain tellings; the readiness of the listener and indeed respect for the ownership rights to certain tellings by those from within the tribe or extended family. This is, to say, that even though one may know a part of the sacred lore
one is not necessarily qualified to tell it if someone else more qualified is present such as a shaman or other holy man. Certain tellings of a historical nature about certain individuals would also not be told by an inappropriate person as indeed one might be accused of taking credit for somebody else's accomplishment or story.

The story of the "Beaver Cap" is thus the first level of acquiring some facility in the oral tradition. The actual event is a ritual taking place at a significant moment in the life of a contemporary Lakota person who, though removed several hundred years temporarily from the common practice of such a rite and perhaps twenty-five years from when the same pan was last used to cook the first kill of someone in the new reservation setting, is subjected to the will of his elders as they attempt to impress upon him the significance of what he has become not only as a human being but also as a Lakota male, one who has passed through one of the first stages of becoming a responsible person on his way to acquiring the cultural ideals, tempered by the reality of the act he has just performed. To kill for food is a reality of life and is necessary if others are to live. This act is the acquisition of a most important skill for survival and it must be used for that purpose. Indeed even to the point of the individual having to serve the food of his first kill in all of its meagerness and in a role which is typically female. Typically the female serves people food except at very large tribal gatherings, and this was not a
large tribal gathering. To learn humility or humiliation as a result of or in light of accomplishment would certainly engender a proper attitude so as not to become too swelled headed over doing something which all along was what one was "supposed" to do anyway. Having done it for the first time however, is a significant moment and needs to be impressed upon the mind of the doer so that he will remember it.

The succeeding acts were those typical of the Lakota as an expression of the endearment they have for the person so being honored and attest to other realms of Lakota metaphysics excluded at this time, but nevertheless including various degrees of the elements of sacrifice and communion with the mythic and each other.

The other implications arising from the story are that the ritual is sponsored by the grandparents of the individual and has import for the role of the elderly in the lives of Native cultures persisting into these times. The actual setting takes place during the resolving years of World War II, when many Lakota men and women left the reservation to work in military installations. The mother of the subject, because of her dexterity served as a fork-lift hoist operator, 100 miles from the reservation setting, loading bombs onto railroad boxcars for transport to east and west coast ports during the war years and afterwards to places where the bombs were dismantled. The father had served during the war but the couple had dissolved the marriage in the interim and hence
the presence of the boy living with his grandparents. The time might be 1948 yet the moment was timeless in its essence in that a young person was being taught the fundamentals of the wisdom of his culture emanating from an ancient place and time, extending itself into a very different time and place; and ultimately accommodating that new time and place. The mere fact that the primal event was equated with the new setting's reality that children must now go to a formal Whiteman's school and that such places were necessary for survival certainly must qualify for some prize awarded for accomplishment in deduction, not that it was new. All of the people present at the event were the first generation of children to either have been young at the beginning of the reservation period or to have been born into it during the 1880's and 1890's. Each of them because of the vissicitudes of the times had been to school at an advanced age for whatever grade they were in when they left and all understood and knew how to speak English, even though they preferred and did use the Lakota language the majority of the time.

They continued to be the repositories of the oral tradition; its content and the vital link in the traditional educational process of their offspring for those of their offspring who could see the validity of the offing. Not all did. This is the meaning of acculturation or paraphrased from the Native perspective. Not having any children or
grandchildren to look after one in one's old age; not having anyone to be proud of because they have forgotten Lakol Wicohanpi, the Lakota traditions which are so well engrained that they become a matter of habit or automatic response to any occasion without having to be reminded of why or when to do the proper thing. The very foundation of Lakol Wicohanpi is the capacity to remember what one was taught about such matters including the messages of the ancient gods who speak from mythic time.

To ritualize then on this level is to focus the minds and memories of the participants upon a specific significant event and its implications for becoming what the culture prescribes as a "good Person." The attending actions, songs and orations done with extraordinary feeling and sincerity are at once an imprimatur on the total being of the central person who in turn is admonished to remember the all important condition for retention of Lakol Wicoha and incorporation of one's own life story in relation to that of one's people, their history and ideals.

In recent times as Native scholars themselves have begun to examine the body of myth, they have been able, among some groups, to isolate certain clarificatory devices which either preface a telling or come at its end as a means of emphasizing retention. Native story tellers often preface a narration with the proper linguistic device to make it perfectly clear which dimension of time, mythological or temporal, and level of significance he or she is about to reveal. In doing so they give the audience the necessary
clues to adjust their "thinking caps".

Among the Lakota of North and South Dakota, to preface a delivery with Mitakuyepi, my relatives, my people or my everything, immediately signifies something very grave, serious, very profound or sacred is about to be said. Following next would be one of several terms to designate which mythological time or level is about to be narrated. The rough English equivalents are the "once upon a time" or "long, long ago" phrases. For the Lakota, Ehanni spoken with long and reverent duration. "Ehaaaaaaaaaaaaanni" is equivalent to saying "long, long, long, long ago" and properly identifies the content as that body of myth relating to a mythological time before even the world was created and has to do with the creation of the gods and then the creation of the world and all its plants, creatures, and mankind of course being the last, but still existing in the incomplete primal sacred world, indeed not yet living on the face of the world as mortals. This era is when and where undifferentiated man learns the will of the gods and everything's order in the sacred realm.

Stories from this era would appropriately be told as instruction by a shaman or holy man to those, perhaps an apprentice, who were about to undergo some dimension of a sacred rite such as their first purification, their first questing for understanding or in the case of younger people
and their parents as a part of the Youth Sanctification or the Young Woman's Ceremony. Within a family who knew the lore, or by inviting someone who did, on the occasion of a particular significant dream by one of the family members, a portion of the ancient mythology might be told to explain the significance of a dream as a means of reconciling for the dreamer the disparity of the internal workings of the mind with the reality of the tribal beliefs; the sacred realms thus included, and the temporal world.

Such tellings from this domain in mythological time might appropriately include the origin of all things beginning with the first of the gods and how they proceeded to metamorphose into darkness, light, air, water, earth, warmth, coolness, rhythm, sound, time, cohesion, and eternity all bound together as common relatives with the same connecting thread of sacred energy which is at once perpetual movement and infinite mystery.

As the creation unfolds it becomes inhabited by many wonderous beings manifested with, if not themselves, the attributes of unfettered devotion to love, beauty, wisdom justice, faith, creativity and also their negative counterparts growing out of themselves because of uncontrollable excess from within and/or lack of raw immediate, vengeance from without, so typical and truly wise of those old Lakota gods, as they sigh in resignation at the malfeasance of their
metaphysical offspring as much as to say, "They are our relatives and that's just the way they are. Yustan! It is finished; it is decreed; there is no more that can be done about it; leave it alone."

From this era we also learn something of the very core of Lakota metaphysics, the sine qua non of Lakota belief and ritual. Through the cooperation or in some instances the lack of cooperation of the attending gods, the reality of all things in the world that man is able to recognize, including himself are created and placed in proper kinship relationship to the sacred order of the gods; the relationship of the natural and the supernatural order; and finally the earthly kinship order of plants, animals and mankind.

As the plants are created from various admixtures they are breathed into by Tate, the Wind and messenger of the One Above. They are taught the language of each other, the gods and what each of their parts would be used for as to their stems, leaves, seeds, fruit, flowers, and roots. As the insects are created they too undergo the metamorphosis of primordial alchemy at the hands of the creater gods and by the god of wisdom are taught their own language, the language of their predecessors, the plants, and finally the language of the gods.

The process is replicated for the reptiles, birds and land animals including mankind. Each in turn is breathed into and made to come alive, to receive its Woniya, the breath of life sometimes equated with the life force intimately
linked to the ongoing life process of the organism and one dimension of what modern man refers to as soul.

In addition to the breath of life each new creation is given a Nagila by the god of wisdom. Literally translated as "little ghost" it refers more to that primordial force of the universe which is ever present and out of which even the gods emerged. The Lakota mythology tells us it is Taku Skan Skan, that which is and causes all movement in all things ranging from the macrocosm to the tiniest element of the microcosm, and is itself the essence of Wakan Tanka, the all pervasive mystery and ultimate living sacredness of the universe. Possessing a common source of power which all things have in common, they are thus all related by a portion of the thread of their common ancestors the gods.

A third dimension of soul is imparted called the Nagi, a spirit like counter part of the form that it is. This dimension of being is affected by and retains something of the temporal personality of its owner and is thus capricious in the same sense as the human personality is unpredictable. Being imbued with human traits causes this dimension of soul to be at times illusive in its ephemerality and in need of constant attention and strengthening. This is usually accomplished by the receipt of or application of Sicun, the expansive and cumulative power of spiritual assistance derived from interaction with the sacred via sacred acts,
rituals, medicine objects and the ministrations of the shaman as mendicant to the gods on behalf of the person with the erratic Nagi.

Sicun as the fourth kind of soul is a special sacred power with which all things are imbued and is such that it can be expanded or diminished, transferred or received from another, including from others than human beings and is often thought of in the literature as the guardian spirit. Once received it must be cared for properly to remain potent and thought of as a close friend and help in time of need. When such Sicun is retained in an external form such as an amulet, medicine bundle or charm it must be treated as a sacred being for once properly activated it joins with the Sicun of the person who owns it and is really very much a living part of him or herself.

While such concepts continue to remain mysterious to even contemporary Native Americans they remain central to the mythology of a people and are integral to understanding certain aspects of the continuing oral tradition, as the continuation of it has at its core the very task of enabling the contemporary listener to integrate all levels of knowing the soul-like and transparent counterparts of all things as a whole which at once aligns the mythic world with the temporal world of past and future into a mystically understood present which for the Native is the real world, a whole world, replete in which there are no artificial dicotomies and about which there are no longer answers to the question, "So what?"
The telling of stories within this frame of reference have at their heart this and a further illucidation of the ongoing interrelationships and resolutions of disequilibrium arising out of the lack of attention to or straying from the reality of these sacred configurations. This leads us to the next category of tellings or dimension of myth and its pervasiveness in Native thought.

The next category of tellings are identified as **Ehanni Ohunkakan**. Ehanni in this case may be stated with less duration, "Ehaaaaani," long ago but not as long ago or as deep or as sacred as "Ehaaaaaaaaaaaaaani." Stories from this era, while still about the interaction of the gods and the ongoing creation, have about them the quality of gradual differentiation and the gradual retreat of the pure gods who now speak through their messengers and appointees. Mankind now appears upon the newly created face of the earth, having migrated from the immortal underworld through the aid of or intervention of certain god-associates. In this new setting they are able to learn and relearn the new order of things and powers necessary for their new roles in the state of quasi and semi-immortality.

The workings of the Trickster and his associates proliferate in this era and through them contribute further to the ongoing creation and differentiation of man and his activities in relation to the primal gods and their wills.
It is in the approaching resolution stages of this period, it is never really finished, where mankind pays retribution for disobeying by forgetting the wills of the gods or by being led astray by lowly human or Trickster ways. Mankind, however, is redeemed by the all compassionate gods who allow the people to have rituals and ceremonies overseen by shamans and holy men, means by which man can still call upon and communicate with them to receive some of their potency. It is also at this time when the definition and role of the intercessor is established and sanctioned as an institution to be nourished and remembered if through ceremonial means, the people are to be able to periodically retrieve something of their diminished sacred heritage. They are admonished that great strength can only be attained when the spirit-like selves of all things are joined together and this can only be done in a ritually prescribed manner so that man may be renewed by the presence of the ancient gods they knew in the first world; the gods whom they can now only know through faith and from a distance in the mundane world they are compelled to live in because of the human frailty of forgetfulness.

A third category of tellings, referred to as Ehanni Wicowoyake, are those events having taken place within the living memory of the people as Lakota Oyate, or the people as a distinct tribe. These tellings come close to an approximate living history of human events which further illucidate the actual beliefs, modes, manners, technicways
and internal workings of a distinct culture in action as it moves through temporal time and actual space in a particular environment. These include specific references to actual landmarks; approximate dates corresponding with non-Indian calendars as recorded in the mnemonic devices such as winter-counts and skin paintings comparable to autobiographies; and most crucial, as personal accounts of life events passed down through successive tellings from generation to generation which account for much of the content of Native ethnohistory.

The mythic is never totally removed from these tellings as the stories themselves are often how a particular event was altered by the intervention of the sacred in some form or another ranging from accounts of ceremonies, visions, dreams, near miraculous healings, and the fulfilling of a vow made to the gods in exchange for a favor granted. Indeed stories persist which are multi-level in that a story of a historical nature may include stories from the previously mentioned categories as a means of explaining a mystery within a sacred event leading to the resolution of some dimension of the original historical narrative.

The continuing persistence of the oral history tradition is evident today not only in some households where the stories are still told as a matter of course in daily or nightly affairs as family interaction but also during formal periods of the ongoing ceremonial life.
An important part of the vision quest complex among the contemporary Lakota is still the Hanbloglaka, the actual telling of visions and the vision experience first before the shamans and then before the collective body of relatives and guests gathered specifically for that reason following a formal fasting with the pipe or in some cases following participation in a Sun Dance. Young and old alike participate vicariously in the reality undergone by the supplicant, usually on behalf of members of the audience, who in this case serve also to verify the efficacy of the experience by their affirmation of having received the desired outcome of the stated purpose of the event.

As an example: arising from the fact that Plains cultures were warrior and hunting societies, the retelling of warrior feats as a precursor to participation in rituals requiring stamina and courage, as many of the existing ceremonies continue to be, was and is an important part of not only reminding the people of the exigencies of these qualities in historical times but also the extending of these qualities into the present life as ideals to be honored and translated into the new setting. On a metaphysical level it serves to remind the people that for transformation to take place through sacrifice they must undergo a radical change which is comparable to a type of death which must be faced with courage if they are to emerge as truly living
beings having killed their ignorance in a physical act of transformation. For the young it serves to enhance their belief that these qualities are indeed alive as evidenced by their male relatives who are about to undergo the various forms of sacrifice that tradition demands, if the people are to live. It is not restricted only to the males.

During an important part of the contemporary Plains Sun Dance complex, the cutting of the sacred tree by virgin maidens continues to be central to that portion of the ceremony. The telling of warrior feats is told as a means of vicariously transferring the warrior capacity to do a difficult thing, to kill an enemy, to the young ladies themselves who will make the first cutting blows to a living tree and thereby join their own sacred potential for regeneration to that which is about to become the object-being of veneration for the remainder of the ceremony. They are reminded also of the necessity of sacrifice so that life may be attained for the people through the practicing of fortitude by themselves as women and future mothers of the tribe who must and will periodically undergo difficult transformations involved in bringing actual life into the tribe. They are admonished to always remember this ceremony for the future of it depends upon the lesson they learn at this time. Indeed it was the elderly grandmothers who were responsible for the details of this portion of the ceremony in one community of Lakota who decided to do the Sundance after a lapse of a number of years. Rarely is the women's role mentioned in the historical literature in conjunction
with this particular ceremony even though it is mentioned in accounts of the receipt of the Sacred Pipe which preceded the tribal institutionalizing of this particular ceremony. This may be because the major informants have historically been men, as recorded by other men.

We know from experience and the literature that each generation of some Native American groups feels it may be the last to know and practice the old ways which has certainly been true for some groups. Today a growing trend which is occurring is the return of Native people to their ancestral settings after having acquired formal modes of non-Indian higher education. This has been greatly influenced by national policies of Indian self determination and self management of their own affairs. As these numbers of Native professionals have grown we have also witnessed a greater participation of Native teachers in Indian classrooms.

Areas of concern continue to be: can what was originally communicated through the oral tradition be converted to the printed word without losing the nuances and vitality of the spoken word in light of the gradual passing of the older generation? Can succeeding generations continue the oral tradition in light of having been greatly affected by the printed word and electronic media? What will be the impact of the continuing oral tradition as a result of educated natives having read Native content from the academic traditions of anthropology, sociology, literature, religion and others?
Perhaps we need not be concerned with these at this time but instead should be grateful to witness the phenomena of the current cultural renaissance taking place on most Northern Plains reservations in Native languages; music and dance; traditional and contemporary visual arts; ethno-history projects from the point of view of Natives as researched and written by Natives and yes, the growing participation of all levels of Native society in the sacred traditions.

Perhaps the questions concerning the qualitative aspects of the living traditions are from a very non-Native perspective, one which can only perceive the outward appearances of a beaver cap without ever having pulled it over one's eyes in the dark so one can finally see.