Vitality of Indigenous Religions

COSMOLOGY AND MORAL COMMUNITY IN THE LAKOTA SUN DANCE

RECONCEPTUALIZING J. R. WALKER'S ACCOUNT

Fritz Detwiler

ROUTLEDGE

Cosmology and Moral Community in the Lakota Sun Dance

Drawing on Indigenous methodologies, this book uses a close analysis of James R. Walker's 1917 monograph on the Lakota Sun Dance to explore how the Sun Dance communal ritual complex – the most important Lakota ceremony – creates moral community, providing insights into the cosmology and worldview of Lakota tradition.

The book uses Walker's primary source to conduct a reading of the Sun Dance in its nineteenth-century context through the lenses of Lakota metaphysics, cosmology, ontology, and ethics. The author argues that the Sun Dance constitutes a cosmic ethical drama in which persons of all types – human and nonhuman – come together in reciprocal actions and relationships. Drawing on contemporary animist theory and a perspectivist approach that uses Lakota worldview assumptions as the basis for analysis, the book enables a richer understanding of the Sun Dance and its role in the Lakota moral world.

Offering a nuanced understanding that centers Lakota views of the sacred, this book will be relevant to scholars of religion and animism, and all those interested in Native American cultures and lifeways.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2022
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-72558-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-74880-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-16003-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003160038

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Introduction

The ritual theorist Catherine Bell (Bell, 1992) once raised the issue of the functionality of ritual: what does it do and how does it do it? This book addresses these questions directly by arguing that the Lakota Sun Dance ceremonial complex described by James R. Walker centers on the formation of moral community and shows how each stage of that ritual complex enhances and expands moral community.

The Lakota are among the most studied and familiar Native peoples to non-Natives. Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Little Big Horn, Black Elk, Wounded Knee (1890), Little Big Horn, and Wounded Knee (1973) have for generations occupied the popular mind (as has the Dakota Access Pipeline, more recently). Perhaps no other Native ceremony has attracted more attention than the Sun Dance.[1] Many historical accounts and representations of the Lakota by non-Natives reflect racist assumptions of inferior people occupying the lower rungs of human civilization's evolutionary progress. In the first half of the twentieth century, "salvage anthropologists" rushed to Native communities to record their cultures' last vestiges before they disappeared into a romanticized mist of progress and assimilation. Whether as "noble" or "ignoble" "savages," Native people are pictured as "primitive children" in need of the benefits of Western civilization and Christian redemption.

This project rests on the shoulders of the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectivist approach and the religionist Graham Harvey's development of contemporary animist theory. It applies their insights by examining the most important Lakota ceremony, the Sun Dance, in its nineteenth-century iteration, through the lenses of Lakota metaphysics, cosmology, ontology, and ethics. More specifically, it views the Sun Dance as a cosmic ethical drama in which persons of all types come together in reciprocal dialogue, respecting, protecting, and elevating all beings' moral worth. This analysis of the Sun Dance ceremonial process closely follows James Riley Walker's 1917 monograph on the Oglala Sun Dance. While most accounts of the Sun Dance focus on the concluding events during the last four days of the encampment, Walker describes a much broader complex that begins many months prior to the gathering at the Sun Dance site.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003160038-1

Terminology and orthography

The Sun Dance

In the nineteenth century, perhaps thousands of Lakota, ending their winter isolation, came together during the time of a full moon, either in the Moon of Fattening (June) or the Moon of Cherries Blackening (July) (Black Elk, 1953). It was a time of joy during which they rekindled and reinforced their relationships with their human and nonhuman relatives, all of the beings with whom they shared the cosmos, *čhaŋgléška wakȟáŋ*, or the Sacred Hoop. Those who had pledged to dance experienced the fullest embodiment of these relationships and the principle of reciprocity on which the Lakota's relational world was based. As the contemporary Lakota artist and scholar Arthur Amiotte writes, through the Sun Dance, a profound realization occurs in the dancers in which they "realize the wholeness and unity of all things" (Amiotte, 1987, p. 89). Walker's detailed rendering of the ceremonial provides the basis for demonstrating moral community formation at both levels simultaneously – human and nonhuman.

The distinguishing feature of the Sun Dance is the flesh sacrifices dancers make to sacred powers. Most sources attribute its origin to a time in the deep past when, in a time of need, White Buffalo Calf Woman appeared to them and gifted them with the Sacred Pipe and the seven rituals, including the Sun Dance, essential to Lakota ceremonial life.

In the middle to late nineteenth century, when whites became more aware of the Sun Dance, religious and government leaders expressed outrage at the flesh sacrifices. Religious leaders condemned it as barbaric evidence of Lakota heathenism, forgetting that the Catholic Eucharist also involves flesh sacrifice. Government leaders inflamed white opposition by interpreting it as evidence of the violent, warlike character of the Lakota. These opponents came together to ban the Sun Dance in 1883. Although it never entirely disappeared, the government failed to restore permission for the Sun Dance until the 1920s. In modified form, it continues to this day to be the most important Lakota ceremony.

In *Lakota America*, Pekka Hämäläinen describes in great detail how the Lakota came to dominate the political, military, and economic life of the upper Great Plains during this period. Through their aggressive expansionist policies and at the height of their power, the Lakota established a functional sovereign nation *within* the United States but *outside* the reach of governmental authority. During the middle part of this period, the Lakota lived in relative peace. That peace was strained by government efforts to force the Lakota onto increasingly reduced reservation lands. It was utterly shattered by the death of Sitting Bull and his people's massacre at Wounded Knee (Hämäläinen, 2019).

My representations of Lakota worldviews[2] reflect Lakota life during the Great Sioux Reservation period, roughly between the signing of the second

Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868, which established the reservation, and 1883 when the government banned Lakota ceremonialism. The 1880s marked the intensification of forced assimilation and Christianization through governmental policies designed to destroy earlier forms of Lakota lifeways; in other words, cultural genocide.

By the time Lakotas transmitted their knowledge to James R. Walker, their open-range semi-nomadic life had ended. Walker drew his source material from Lakota elders who had first-hand knowledge of the old ways. A couple of decades later, Nicholas Black Elk, a respected elder, feared that the traditions were in danger of disappearing. He sought to preserve the ceremonial heart of the old ways through conversations with Joseph Epes Brown. Brown later published them in Black Elk's *The Sacred Pipe*. Although not acknowledged by Brown, Black Elk's commentary is strongly conditioned by his decades-long practice of Catholicism and leadership in the Catholic Church. Thus, *The Sacred Pipe* should be read with this in mind. While considerable debate exists among scholars as to the degree Black Elk's materials favor his Christian or pre-Christian inclinations, it is clear that his motivation was to preserve the ceremonies central to an older way of life for future generations.

Until the last few decades, most non-Lakota scholarly studies of Lakota "religion" perpetuated colonial misinterpretations of Lakota traditions by employing Western terminology that marginalizes Lakota worldviews. One evidence of this is the persistent use of the terms "supernatural" and "God(s)," as in Åke Hultkrantz's *Native Religions of North America*. One reason for the persistent refusal to use Lakota worldview assumptions and appropriate terminology has to do with academic credentialing. Young scholars interested in Native, and more especially, Plains, traditions seemed to be faced with two choices to please their mentors: either subscribe to (1) the evolutionary model of human development rooted in the theories of Müller, Tylor, Frazer, or Malinowski or (2) the universalistic approach of Eliade and the History of Religion school (Morrison, 2002). Through years of conversations with my colleagues in the Society for the Study of Native American Sacred Traditions, I know of their continuing struggles against having to frame studies of their own people within Western intellectual traditions. Inés Talamantez was a leading voice in challenging the dominant paradigms within the academy. The advent of Native American and Indigenous Studies programs at many universities have begun to decolonize the field. Through these programs, young Native scholars are encouraged to investigate and honor their own nations' traditions.

The colonization of the field did not occur without resistance. Native voices in works such as Charles Eastman's *The Soul of the Indian*, Luther Standing Bear's *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, and Ella C. Deloria's *Speaking of Indians* and *Dakota Texts* were among the earliest. They were followed by John (Fire) Lame Deer's *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions* and Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *God Is Red* and *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*. More recently, Pete

Catches' *Sacred Fireplace* and Arthur Amiotte's *The Lakota Sun Dance* provided new critiques. Non-Native scholars such as Howard Harrod, *Renewing the World*, William K. Powers, *Oglala Religion* and *Sacred Language*, and Raymond DeMaillie and Elaine Jahner, who republished Walker's materials, were important allies. Powers continues to publish early Lakota materials through his Lakota Books enterprise.

A note about source materials

Much of what follows rests on the precarious perch of what Thomas Norton-Smith calls "rational reconstruction" (Norton-Smith, 2010, p. 6). It is an approach, first suggested by Vine Deloria, by which scholars engage in intensive research to "project what the various tribal peoples probably meant when they described the world around them" (Deloria, 2004, p. 4). In adopting such an approach, what follows is my projection. It is offered in the spirit of Robert Warrior's call for an approach to indigenous studies that moves to the center of scholarly research, Native interests and assumptions about the world and welcomes into the dialogue all scholars who are willing to do so (Detwiler, 2013). Using Gregory Younging's term, I position this work as that of an "ally," someone who is "supportive of Indigenous People's political and cultural aspirations" and who seeks to bring "increased public awareness of these aspirations" (Younging, 2018, p. 10).

My perspective

This study brings traditional Lakota theories and categories to the foreground and utilizes them to interpret the Sun Dance through what I understand to be Lakota lenses. As a non-Native, I do not pretend to speak *for* the Lakota. I approach this with humility and trepidation, given the justifiable sensitivity Native people have to non-Native representations of their traditions. It is my hope that the project will contribute to the "ontological turn" occurring in Native studies and anthropology by bringing Lakota assumptions to the forefront.

Before going into the project's theoretical underpinnings, a note on terminology and orthography is in order. Where possible, I avoid the term "Sioux." The identifier is not their own. It is rooted in a French corruption of the word some of their eastern rivals used to describe the Lakota/Nakota/Dakota: *nadoueissiw*, which means something like "snakes." The French shortened this to "Sioux" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 4). The Lakotas still use "Sioux," but the trend is to move toward more Lakota terminology. I also do not use the term "tribe," preferring the term "nation" out of respect for Native struggles for sovereignty and control of their lands. The term "Native" replaces "Native American," "Indian," and "American Indian," except where the sources from which I draw uses them.

The terms "Lakota," "Dakota," and "Nakota" refer to different groups of related peoples who speak their respective dialects of the same language and share very similar worldviews. This study focuses on the Lakotas, who are the westernmost of the three peoples. Seven different "fireplaces" constitute the Lakota or Tetons. The collective term for these fireplaces is *Očhéthi Šakówiŋ*. The Oglala are one of these seven groups. At present, the center of the Oglala *Oyáte* or Nation is on the Pine Ridge Reservation in southwest South Dakota. Where "Lakota" appears, I am referring to lifeways shared by all seven fireplaces. Where "Oglala" appears, it refers to the people of Pine Ridge and their diaspora.

One additional personal note on "naming." While I was living in the Ho-Chunk (then, Winnebago) community in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, some years ago, an elder asked me what term I used for Native peoples as a whole. When I said, "Native American," he responded, "Oh, yeah, that's what eggheads call us!" I then turned the question back on him. He said he was O.K. with "Indian" or "American Indian" when talking with outsiders, but in conversations with other "Indians," he said, "we use tribal names," such as Diné or Menominee. He continued, "When we talk to people within our own tribe, we use family names, and within families, we describe our relationship to the other people." These relational names are complex, and in earlier times, the Lakota insisted that young people learn them as soon as possible to maintain proper protocols. While it may prove difficult for some readers, I also employ Lakota orthography used by the *New Lakota Dictionary (NLD)* (Lakota Language Consortium, 2016) except when quoting sources. Albert White Hat, Jr., uses a slightly different form, and David Posthumus a third form. James Riley Walker employs a convention found widely in the literature on the Lakota by not using Lakota orthography in any form and rendering the terms in English. For example, the Lakota term *Wakȟáŋ Tȟáŋka* becomes *Wakan Tanka*. My reason for using NLD's orthography is to clearly indicate that these terms are not to be understood through Western lenses. When a given orthography is chosen, it reminds us of the deeper worldview assumptions that stand behind the terms. I apologize for any transcription errors. I have had to "guess" at some of the words, given that the *NLD* emphasizes contemporary usage and does not contain listings for some of Walker's traditional terms. Where it does, the editors identify some of them as "archaic."

I remain conflicted about capitalization when using Lakota terms. I have chosen to capitalize those terms that refer to specific "people," such as *Makȟá*, *Ptesáŋwin*, and *Tȟatȟáŋka* (respectively "Earth," "White Buffalo Calf Woman," and "Buffalo"). I italicize Lakota terms and give an English gloss following their usage, i.e., "*Šká*ŋ or Sky." For concepts such as "*Wí*" or "*thióšpaye*" that appear frequently, I trust the reader will become familiar with their meaning. "*Wakȟáŋ*" deserves specific comment. Sources commonly gloss it as "sacred," and I do employ that gloss. But more precisely, *Wakȟáŋ* refers to particularly powerful potency associated with particular

persons, human or nonhuman. At all times, terms like "sacred" or "power" are not to be generalized. They refer to specific entities. We only know of its presence and nature through encounters with "this" particular Bear, Buffalo, or this presence of *Škáŋ*.

Perspectivism and the ontological turn

A. Irving Hallowell laid the foundation for what came to be known as the "ontological turn" in anthropology in his seminal 1960 essay, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View," when he interpreted Ojibwa culture from their own worldview assumptions (Hallowell, 1975). This approach has become a pillar of indigenous methodologies. By changing the "perspective," Hallowell opened up new pathways for research and understanding. In Native studies, Vine Deloria, Jr., and Sam Gill were at the forefront of this movement. Kenneth Morrison (Morrison, 1992), Melissa Pflüg (Pflűg, 1992), and I (Detwiler, 1992) made the ontological turn explicit in our series of 1992 essays. All three of us acknowledged our indebtedness to Hallowell. More recently, several books and articles have appeared on defining and applying Indigenous methodologies. For example, Eva Garroutte (Garroutte, 2003), Shaun Wilson (Wilson, 2008), Kathleen Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe) (Minogiizhigokwe, 2011), Linda Tuhiwai, Norman Denzin, and Yvonna Lincoln separately and collectively (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008), and Dennis McPherson and Douglas Rabb (McPherson & Rabb, 2011), among others, all have made major contributions in this area.

The "perspectivist" approach employed in this book rests on the pioneering work of anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Viveiros de Castro shares Hallowell's insight that Native peoples experience the world as inhabited by very different kinds of persons, human and nonhuman. He pushes this idea to argue that these persons "apprehend reality from distinct points of view" (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 229). Bears and humans, for example, share personhood, but not in the same way or at the same time. Bears see the world from their own perspective, a perspective driven by their experiences, interests, and the particular problems they face in life. Humans do the same. So, while Bears may see humans as "food," "humans" also see Bears as "food," and this conditions the way Bears and humans perceive the other. Viveiros de Castro concludes that while both humans and Bears live in the same reality, they see it differently. He writes, "A human and a jaguar cannot be people at the same time; it is impossible to experience blood as beer without having-already-become a jaguar" (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 178).

For Viveiros de Castro, the perspectivist approach requires us to see the world from the perspective of the other (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 186). When we do so, we became acutely aware that the Bear's interests are different from our own. But from standing in their "paws," so to speak, we also learn how Bears do things, how they like to be treated, and how they

seemingly intuitively understand the relational web in which we all live. They are willing to become "food" if humans also respect their interest in their own well-being. Only through entry into respectful, reciprocal relations with Bears can humans begin to live in harmony with them.

Contemporary animism

In theorizing about animism, Graham Harvey draws a clear distinction between the older concern "with knowing what is alive and what makes a being alive" and the new animism that focuses on "how they might respectfully and properly engage with other persons" (Harvey, 2006, pp. xi, xiv). For Harvey and other contemporary animism theorists, the Indigenous world is a world of persons, some human and some nonhuman, all who live in relation with others. Animism describes how various kinds of persons "engage with other species or material things" (Harvey, 2013, p. 6). Because it is relational, animism "is always local and specific" (Harvey, 2013, p. 3).

Reflecting the earlier world of A. Irving Hallowell, Nurit Bird-David (Bird-David, 2002), Kenneth Morrison describes the difference between forms of animism in which "life is organized around the existence of persons, human and otherwise, rather than around materiality, functionality, and abstraction" (Morrison, 2013, p. 39). Tim Ingold further draws out this contrast. Ingold argues that the new animism is not "a way of thinking *about* the world but of being alive *to* it" (Ingold, 2006, p. 10, emphasis in the original). Ingold's use of the phrase "alive *to* it" goes beyond the sense that we live *in* such a world. It means that all persons live in an intersubjective world, a relational matrix, and because of that, all our actions have an impact on the well-being of one another. Ingold's animist model rests on "an ontology that assigns primacy to processes of formation" of mutually enriching relationships between human and nonhuman persons (Ingold, 2013, p. 234).

Doug Ezzy emphasizes the moral dimension of animism. He uses the phrase "primordial ethical enmeshment" to situate ethics at the center of being human. He writes, "It is impossible to be a person without always and already being enmeshed in ethical intersubjectivity" (Ezzy, 2013, p. 182, 184). Thus, ethics is not something "added" to the human project. It is "primordial in the sense that it is always and already there, integral with the experience of being a person." The ethical emerges in the nature and etiquette of intersubjective relations (Ezzy, 2013, p. 182) and the interests each brings to the encounter. Animism, combined with perspectivism, explores these interests from the perspective of those persons who hold them and how relationships contribute to or detract from the well-being of the other. As Harvey notes, animism asks, "What matters to hedgehogs?" (Ezzy, 2013, p. 184).

Luther Standing Bear brings this ethical imperative home to the Lakota, noting, "The acceptance of a kinship with other orders of life was the first

step toward" becoming a human (Standing Bear, 2006, p. 202). Such relationships involve gift exchange and proceed based on moral covenants or reciprocal agreements which obligate the parties to respect the interests of the other. Those interests most frequently reflect the desire of the various nations, human or Bird or Buffalo, to protect their future generations.

Who am I to write such a book?

Ella Deloria suggests that it is "improper to plunge into the conversation without first" locating yourself in relation to others (Deloria, 1992, p. 17). Biography is important. I do not pretend to speak for Lakota. They're perfectly capable of doing that for themselves, and they have done so and continue to do so. For the past four decades, I have endeavored to understand Lakota lifeways from the perspective of their own metaphysical, cosmological, ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions. Any misrepresentations are evidence that the process of understanding is not complete and is probably rooted in my own Euro-American biases. I have no blood connection to any Native peoples, and I did not begin this journey until after completing my undergraduate and seminary training. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the members of the Society for the Study of Native American Religious Traditions (SSNART) with whom I have been associated from the organizations beginning in the late 1980s and to my colleagues in the Native Traditions in the Americas group of the American Academy of Religion. I have listened to them carefully, and they have been generously gentle in supporting my work and guiding me to deeper understandings.

From a very young age, I was interested in the serious pursuit of understanding the world in which I found myself living. I grew up in a Christian family. My grandmother taught Sunday school in the same church for 80 years. Family pressures, especially those coming from my grandmother, led me to consider the ministry. Seeds of doubt about this direction in life began in my late elementary years, having attended Sunday school and vacation Bible school regularly. The world they described to me seemed incongruent with the world as I was experiencing it. My quest for understanding led me to become a nuisance to the ministers at a church camp that I attended, and where I later worked, by questioning them about a number of the doctrines of the Methodist Christian tradition. I never did fully accept those teachings. Yet, as an undergraduate, I majored in religion and minored in philosophy, intending to go to seminary. After my seminary education, I was faced with a dilemma. What was I going to do? I knew I had not the will, the interest in, nor the personality for the ministry. It was at this point where serendipity intervened.

An advertisement for a position as youth worker/youth minister at a Ho-Chunk (then Winnebago) settlement outside Black River Falls, Wisconsin, caught my eye. I applied and later learned that my successful application was based on the argument that I was the only one who applied and if they

didn't take me, they might not get anybody. With that full endorsement of my talents, I moved into their community and gradually learned about their lifeways, and gained unofficial status as a member of the community basketball team. Before our first game in the town's recreational league, they put my game jersey on me. Each of their jerseys had a nickname on the back. After the game, I took off the shirt and looked at the back where they had placed my nickname: "Token." Not quite the same as a relative, but I did have standing!

After leaving the mission settlement, I entered graduate school to focus on American religious history. In the mid-1970s, the program did not include any content on Native religions. Again, serendipity became involved. My department provided funding to study with Joseph Epes Brown and Barre Toelken at the University of Montana. Returning to my graduate program, I began writing about Native ethics using Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martin Buber, and H. Richard Niebuhr as my inspirations. My dissertation provides the main content of this book.

I barely passed my defense. The approach of analyzing the Sun Dance from Lakota perspectives did not sit well with my committee of Euro-American-oriented scholars. But I took heart from an experience I had while writing the dissertation. A powerful force emerged from the words I was writing about the climactic events of the processional into the sacred circle on the final day of the ceremony. I had tapped into something. Perhaps it was *wakȟáŋ* potency? Many years later, a second experience gave me comfort. I was sitting on a porch near the Lakota middle school in Manderson, on the Pine Ridge Reservation. It was the morning after *Wakíŋyaŋ*, the powerful thunder being, visited us. Having previously questioned the propriety of me being in Manderson, I felt the gentle, welcoming power of *Ókaǧa*, South Wind, coming over me. I took that as a sign that the powers accepted my presence. While that conclusion may be presumptuous, it was what I experienced.

Going forward

The book is constructed to engage the reader in a great cosmic moral drama that unfolds each year for the Lakota. Chapter One introduces you to the four phases of the Sun Dance ceremonial complex and the Lakota people themselves: their history and social organization. Chapter Two opens a window into concepts fundamental to Lakota worldviews through the lens of Lakota understandings of personhood. The chapter includes four stories designed to show the complexity of the moral world and the nature of those nonhuman persons most central to the ritual complex. Chapter Three begins our analysis of the Sun Dance ceremonial process. Here, the candidates announce their intentions to dance, select someone to guide their preparations, secure the community's participation, and expand the social community by inviting other groups to the dance. Chapter Four engages us