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The Lakota Sacred Pipe: Its Tribal Use and Religious Philosophy

PATRICIA L. KAISER

I am making sacred smoke;
In this manner I make the smoke;
May all the people behold it!
I am making sacred smoke;

.....
All over the universe there will be rejoicing!

Sacred Smoke. Kablaya sang this song a long time ago when he danced the first Sun Dance among the Oglalas.¹ Kablaya, like all Native Americans, understood the importance of sacred smoke; he knew that no ritual deed, no spiritual act, took place without the sacred pipe. Native American pipe smoking gripped the imaginations of early White observers, who called the pipe various names, most often the calumet or the peace pipe. Yet White people, taking readily to smoking as a personal and social pleasure, failed to understand Native American pipe use as a sacred act.² White people failed to comprehend pipe smoking as an act relating the smoker spiritually to all living things and their Creator. And to this day White culture readily associates the pipe with Native Americans, but it rarely goes beyond its romantic

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associations to any real comprehension of the pipe's use and sacred function. While it is impossible in one article to cover the pipe's sacred function among all Native American tribes, an examination of its use and spiritual place among the Lakotas—a People who live because of the pipe—will hopefully deepen appreciation for its place among all Native Americans.

For the purpose of this paper, the dialectical term Lakota will be used, rather than the more familiar "Sioux" or the political/geographical designations "Teton" or "Titunwan."³ Discussion of the pipe will be limited to the people who call themselves "Lakotas," whose subdivisions include: Oglala, Sicangu, Hunkpapa, Sicasapa, Ooheunumpa, Itazipaco, and Mnikowoju.⁴ Discussion will first explore the pipe's sacred origin; next, an overview of Lakota pipemaking and adornment and the spirituality inherent in these acts will be given; discussion will then stress the pipe's utilization and religious base in daily and ceremonial life; and finally, the pipe's life-sustaining and renewing power will be explored. It is hoped this examination of the pipe's function in tribal life will bring a deeper appreciation and understanding of the pipe's sacred place among the Lakotas and, indeed, among all Native Americans.

The Lakotas have used the pipe for several hundred years, but there are disagreements among scholars and Lakotas over its origins. The Lakotas believe the pipe came, not of human origin, but as a gift from the Buffalo nation, brought by the White Buffalo Calf Woman. Some Lakotas maintain the tribe had no pipes before the Buffalo nation's gift,⁵ which places the pipe's origin somewhere after the mid-eighteenth century when the Lakotas became a buffalo hunting culture.⁶ Yet the *wicasa wakan* Fool's Crow, Lakota Holy Man and ceremonial leader, believes pipe use began somewhere between 1200–1500 A.D.⁷ These historical contradictions can be understood, but not completely resolved, by looking at the origin problem from two cultural standpoints: when did Sioux pipe use begin and when did the Lakotas receive the Buffalo nation's gift, the Sacred Pipe?

From pipes found in the Hopewell and other mounds there is evidence of ancient and widespread pipe use among Native Americans. Since migrating tribes traded and adopted various material cultures, it seems likely that Siouan culture began pipe use early in its history, perhaps during the migration from Mississippi to Minnesota. Documentation shows the Sioux were

using pipes when they made contact with White people. Radisson (1661–1662) describes smoking pipes with the Sioux; Perrout (1662; 1690–91) refers to the Sioux's use of the calumet; and Le Sueur (1700) records smoking the calumet with the Sioux in eastern Minnesota.⁸ Such documentation appears to support pipe use among the Sioux prior to the Lakota buffalo hunting culture.

Sioux contact with buffalo apparently began in Minnesota where they occasionally hunted the small herds which wandered into western parts of the state.⁹ Yet the Sioux had no horses to hunt buffalo and little need to do so, since the game and fish of the Minnesota Woodlands supported them. Sometime after 1670 the Oglala and Sicangu Teton bands crossed the Minnesota River and began hunting buffalo on the Coteau des Prairies. Westward migration continued until around 1760 when the Teton bands were halted at the Missouri by the Arikaras, from whom they apparently acquired horses. Between 1775–76, with Arikara power diminished by smallpox, Oglala and Sicangu bands crossed the Missouri, with remaining Teton bands following between 1800–1825.¹⁰ Having acquired horses and having moved away from the game rich woodlands, Teton reliance on the buffalo then began sometime after the mid-eighteenth century.¹¹

Attempts to establish the gift of the Sacred Pipe after 1750 are not without conflict. The Sacred Calf Pipe is shown in two picture writings from 901–930 and 931–1000 A.D. Black Elk maintains the Sacred Pipe came before The Sun Dance, yet the earliest known Sioux Sun Dance is 1713, which would place the Sacred Pipe's origins prior to Teton buffalo culture.¹² Yet J. L. Smith indicates some Sioux winter counts show “. . . from 1785 to 1800 . . . a god-woman or a woman dressed in white coming among the Teton.”¹³ Smith's origins, while offering no resolution to conflicting dates, appear historically plausible, corresponding as they do with the Teton's Missouri River crossing and the beginnings of their Plains culture.

Historical documentation, then, establishes Sioux pipe use prior to the Teton westward migration, and, while failing to resolve contradictory dates (a problem which may remain unresolved), evidence ties the Sacred Pipe's coming to the Lakota Plains experience. Yet the pipe's cultural meaning and veneration does not depend solely upon historical documentation but upon its origins as a spiritual gift as well. Since Lakota Plains

culture evolved and existed around the buffalo (the life sustaining meat, hides, bones, etc.), the Buffalo nation's gift represents an important life giving experience and any discussion of the Lakota pipe must include understanding its spiritual origins.

The pipe's origin among the Lakotas is known as the Sacred Calf Pipe Myth or The Coming of White Buffalo Calf Woman.¹⁴ Passed from generation to generation, the sacred legend may differ somewhat among Lakota subdivisions and from one storyteller to another. Basically, however, the legend tells how long ago, during a time when the Lakotas were hungry, two hunters went out for meat. As they stood on a hill they saw something approaching in a mysterious way. When the thing came closer they saw it was a beautiful woman dressed in white buckskins and wearing a bundle on her back. One of the men saw her beauty and felt lust for her, while the other man cautioned against such thoughts. The woman came near and, putting down her bundle, asked the bad-intentioned man to come to her. As he came close a cloud covered them, and when it lifted the woman stood alone. On the ground were only the bones of the lustful man and they were being eaten by snakes. Then the woman spoke to the other man, telling him that she brought the people a great message and that she wished to speak with their leader, Hehlokecha Najin (Standing Hollow Horn). She told the man to go to his people, prepare a large tipi and gather all the people to hear her message.¹⁵

The hunter returned, and in response to his tale the people made a great lodge. Dressed in their finest clothes, they waited for this *wakan* woman. As they waited they saw something mysteriously beautiful coming. Suddenly the woman stood among them. She walked sun-wise around the great lodge and stood before Hehlokecha Najin. She took the bundle and held it before him saying:

Behold this and always love it! It is *lela waken* [very sacred], and you must treat it as such. No impure man should ever be allowed to see it, for within this bundle there is a sacred pipe. With this you will, during the winters to come, send your voices to *Wakan-Tanka*, your Father and Grandfather.¹⁶

After this the woman took from the bundle a pipe and round stone, placing the stone on the ground. Holding the pipe toward the heavens, she said, "With this sacred pipe you will

walk. . . .¹⁷ She then instructed the people on the pipe's meaning: The red stone bowl came from Earth and the bowl's carved buffalo calf represented all four legged creatures living on Earth; the pipestem, made of wood, signified all growing things on Earth; the twelve spotted eagle feathers, hanging from the juncture of stem and bowl, represented the Eagle and all the winged creatures of the air. All these living things and everything in the Universe join, the woman instructed, when the pipe is smoked and ". . . all send their voices to Wakan-Tanka. . . ."¹⁸

The woman then touched the pipe to the round stone, the stone representing the seven rites in which the pipe would be used. She then gave the people the first rite, The Keeping of the Soul, with the promise that the remaining rites would later be revealed to them.¹⁹ She then turned to Hehlokecha Najin and said, "Behold this pipe! Always remember how sacred it is, and treat it as such, for it will take you to the end . . . I am leaving now, but I shall look back upon your people in every age, and at the end I shall return."²⁰

After this the *wakan* woman left the lodge and walked a short distance. Looking back, she walked on, eventually becoming a black buffalo. Walking further, the buffalo stopped, bowed to the four quarters of the Universe and then disappeared over the hill.²¹

So ends the myth of the White Buffalo Calf Woman's wondrous gift. For White people accustomed to thinking of myths as something "made up," the truth and reality of this gift may well be lost. To appreciate the pipe's importance it is necessary to understand the gift of the pipe as both an historical event and as an enduring mythic experience, one which happened and continues to happen in Lakota life. Historically placing the Pipe's origins sometime after 1750 enables us to understand when the pipe began its elevation as the Lakota's central cultural symbol. While Lakotas may assist in making this historical documentation, they do not require it to validate the Pipe's sacred origins or its truth. Validation of events with historical proof is a recent development in human history, one particularly important to Western cultures. Meaning and truth for Westerners frequently requires the proof of numbers or tangibles—the measurable. And since the provable depends upon our ability (and willingness) to measure, we in Western cultures are often left with little meaning and few truths. For the Lakotas, however, the validity of White Buffalo Calf Woman's gift requires no proof, since its truth

rests in the mythic transmission of the tribe's "psychical experience."²² The pipe's coming is a mythic, holy event, one in which Great Mystery is revealed by a certain individual in a certain place. Whites may find such an experience hard to believe, independent as it is from exact authentication, yet its truth is not really so difficult to comprehend. For example, in Western civilization millions of people have accepted the truth of Christianity without historical proof of the events in Christ's life; they have accepted that ". . . the reality which is manifest in . . . Jesus as Christ has saving power for those who are grasped by it, no matter how much or how little can be traced to the historical figure . . . called Jesus of Nazareth."²³

Historical documentation and mythic narrative exist, then, in different dimensions, but they are at odds only if we refuse to accept the unique functions of each. They both provide useful but different expressions of truth: Historical authentication enables us to understand when and why the pipe became central to Lakota cultural development; mythic narrative allows us to understand the meaning of a People's whole experience—how they perceive themselves, past and present. When the Lakotas received the Sacred Pipe (and its precise origins may never be documented), they experienced a transforming event, one which bound them forever to the Plains and all living things around them. The Pipe became the central expression of this experience. White Buffalo Calf Woman made this clear when she said, "With this pipe you will be bound to all your relatives."²⁴ The Lakotas experience the pipe's meaning each time they end a ceremony with "*mitakuye oyasin*" ("all my relatives"), meaning all living things—two leggeds, four leggeds, wingeds, earth, trees, stone—are joined through the Sacred Pipe. The truth of this act requires neither documentation nor proof but rests in the pipe's transforming experience and in the continuing power of unification it gives to those who, even now, send their prayers through the Sacred Smoke.

Careful to remember the pipe's sacred origins and White Buffalo Calf Woman's promise to return, the Lakotas keep to this day what is revered as the original Sacred Pipe. Called *Ptehincala Huhu Canunpa* (Buffalo Calf Bone Pipe), the Pipe has been kept since reservation days at Green Grass on the Lakota Cheyenne River reservation, home of the hereditary Keeper of the Sacred Pipe. White scholars and the Lakota people differ over

the number of hereditary keepers there have been, but the Lakotas recognize the Elk Head clan as the keepers for fourteen generations. The current Sacred Pipe Keeper is Stanley Looking Horse, who will care for the Pipe until he passes the responsibility to his son, Arvol.²⁵

The Pipe is kept wrapped in bundle and documented openings of the Sacred Calf Pipe Bundle are few: It was opened in 1936 for Wilbur Reigert; and the anthropologist Sidney Thomas witnessed the Bundle's opening sometime between 1934²⁶ and 1941.²⁷ Descriptions of the Bundle's contents vary: Lame Deer describes the original Pipe as being adorned with red eagle feathers, four small scalps and bird skins and kept wrapped in buffalo wool and red flannel;²⁸ Royal Hassrick, in *The Sioux*, indicates the Pipe's bowl to be T-shaped and made of red catlinite;²⁹ Smith writes that the Pipe's present bowl is not the original but a replacement of the decaying deer shank bowl which is now kept in a skin bag inside the Bundle. Also reported to be within the Bundle are paddles similar to those once used to carry hot coals in the Teton Keeping-of-the-Ghost ritual. Conch shells were placed on such paddles to carry the coals and the Pipe bundle hung from a tripod by a beaded thong with an attached conch shell.³⁰ This tripod was once placed outside to face the sunlight. Current accounts, however, indicate the Bundle is wrapped and kept safely away from the curiosity and disrespect of non-believers,³¹ but medicine men go to Green Grass to touch their pipes to the Pipe Bundle.³² For traditional Lakotas viewing the Sacred Bundle or its contents is not necessary to establish its existence; they know the *Ptehin-cala Huhu Canunpa* exists, and as long as they keep the Sacred Pipe the tribe will live.

The Lakota people's reverence for the pipe's holiness and life-giving promise extends from their ancestors' experience with White Buffalo Calf Woman. This reverence naturally expresses itself in pipemaking and has produced generations of superbly crafted pipes. The earliest pipes were usually made of bone (a legbone section of deer, antelope or bison, for example) and consisted of a long smoking tube. Since these pipes often cracked when hot, they were frequently wrapped with sinew to reinforce the pipe and to make holding the heated tube easier. Other tube pipes were carved from stone, consisting either of a solid stone tube or stone bowl with wooden stem.³³ At some point, however, Lakota craftsmen began fashioning pipes after the original Sacred

pipe: The familiar L- and T-shaped pipes of separate stem and bowl emerged, with the bowl, like the original pipe, made of red stone.

This red stone, called *Inyan Sha*, was (and still is) quarried in Southwestern Minnesota near what is now Pipestone National Monument.³⁴ The stone is now more familiarly known as catlinite, after the artist George Catlin, whose paintings of the quarry and Native American pipes are widely known. Catlin traveled to the quarry in 1836 and believed he was the first White man to visit the site. This assumption was later proved wrong, since the site had previously been located on a French map and was visited in 1832 by the trader Philander Prescott.³⁵ Catlin was proved incorrect in many other assumptions about the quarry and about pipes—most notably his understanding of their sacred origins—but to his credit he respected the pipe's importance, and he sought to learn all he could while most White people viewed the pipe as mere superstition.³⁶ Catlin was the first White man to picture the site and the first to have samples of the red stone scientifically analyzed.³⁷

Pipe bowls made from catlinite were highly prized by the Lakotas (they did carve bowls of steatite, argillite, shale and limestone as well) because of their relationship to the original Sacred Pipe and because the precious red stone represented Earth and the People's life blood.³⁸ By the nineteenth century this pipemaking, carving and adornment reached a superb artistic level, the result of slow, meticulous craftsmanship. If the pipe's bowl was to be catlinite, the fragile *inyan sha* had to be removed from intervening shale deposits. The Lakota pipemaker first carved an eight to ten foot thick layer of quartzite and then broke and removed the pipestone layers from the shale.³⁹ The pipestone was then cut to desired size by flint and string sawing. After drawing the bowl on this piece, the pipemaker chiseled away the excess and smoothed the bowl with scrapers or blocks of quartzite, sandstone or sand.⁴⁰

Once the bowl was cut and smoothed, the pipemaker used wood, flint, and later, knives to drill the bowl and stem. Catlin describes one careful method required for boring the bowl:

. . . it [the bowl] is sunk into a block or log of wood where it remains fast, and is drilled by a piece of very hard wood, made at the end, of the size and shape required in the bowl. The stick is rolled between the

hands, while a fine sand and water are applied to the hole; and in *finishing* the bore, a second person bears upon the top of the drill with another block of wood . . . to prevent it from vibrating. By this process great precision is gained, but much labour and great patience are required.⁴¹

Of course Catlin viewed pipemaking through Western eyes, seeing and respecting the labor and tedium involved. It is doubtful, however, whether the Lakota pipemaker perceived labor or patience in the European sense. This does not mean the pipemaker knew nothing of hard work (no Lakota survived long without the capacity for hard and concentrated effort). Indeed, as an artist, he was a craftsman who brought to his art a careful plan and painstakingly practiced skills. The pipemaker brought to his acts no Western perception of labor, his carving being a response to environmental and spiritual experience. Unaware of time clocks and production for consumption, the Lakota pipemaker simply carved, his efforts being natural as the pipe's elements—stone, earth, wood; he carved, neither measuring the time nor the patience involved, but experiencing the duration and capacity needed for these meaningful acts; he carved, remembering through his art the pipe's sacred origin and so his enduring kinship with the earth and sky.

Once this craftsman completed the pipe's bowl, he polished it with buffalo tallow and other fats to give it a fine sheen.⁴² Now he fashioned the pipestem to balance the bowl. Although catlinite stems were highly valued, they broke easily, and so pipemakers more often used willow, cottonwood or gray ash, the ash most preferred because of its strength and straightness. Like bowl carving, making the stem required time and skill. In the old days the ash stem's center was either burned through with a hardwood stick, or the stem was split lengthwise with both halves hollowed out and then glued back together.⁴³ Later pipemakers used a hot wire to burn out the ashwood's soft core.⁴⁴

Decoration of the pipe's bowl and stem followed its completion, and the Lakotas gave as much thought to pipe adornment as to its construction. Pipebowls were frequently embellished with carvings: human faces, wingeds, turtles, spiders, lizards.⁴⁵ After 1850 many Lakota pipebowls were skillfully inlaid with lead or silver. Stems, made in round, thin, flat or spiral designs, were often given woodburned or painted designs.⁴⁶ Lakota women

contributed to the pipe's adornment by adding porcupine quillwork and beadwork bands which extended from the mouthpiece several inches toward the bowl. Additional adornment incorporated beauty from the natural world: hair, fur, feathers, skins. So embellished, the pipe was stored and carried in the *cantojuha* (heart bag), a pipe bag usually made of buckskin and decorated with quill or beadwork. Contained in the *cantojuha* was a smoking mixture *cansasa*, made from the inner bark of the red willow, red alder or red dogwood.⁴⁷ *Cansasa* is most often known in English as *kinnickinnick* and was often mixed with tobacco for smoking.⁴⁸ Cutting and mixing the smoking tobacco required a small chopping board made of antler, stone or wood, the latter often being decorated with brass tacks. Completing the pipe's accessories was a wooden pipe tamper, embellished with quill or beadwork.

While the Lakota pipe owner gave the embellishment of his pipe and its accessories serious consideration, the artistic effort was principally a spiritual expression and not aimed solely at decoration. Like all people the Lakotas sought to beautify their surroundings and personal world, but unlike modern Western people they did not separate art and religion. Their pipe decoration certainly produced startling beauty, but more importantly, it signified the pipe owner's personal vision, his portrayal through beauty, of his contact with spiritual powers. The art of pipe decoration expressed something basic to Lakota existence: Beauty exists all around, in this world and in the spirit realm, and human beings experience the beauty of both through their art.

While artistic adornment of the pipe and its accessories was the norm, some pipes and pipe paraphernalia were left plain. Although the Lakotas prized a beautiful pipe, they valued more highly a pipe's purpose or use.⁴⁹ Even the plainest pipe (of animal bone) was powerful if its use brought health and continuity to individuals and the tribe. Thus understanding of the Lakota pipe cannot be limited to its sacred origin, construction and decoration but must include the pipe's uses as social, personal and ceremonial expression among the tribe.

The Lakota pipe was most frequently used for pleasure smoking. Men and women made small, plain pipes of wood or deer or buffalo femur which they smoked for enjoyment.⁵⁰ There is no indication, however, of tobacco dependence among the

Lakota prior to reservation days. Their pleasure smoking was characterized by a philosophy and ritual which made excessive use and dependence unlikely. In the old days the Lakotas, like all Native Americans, lived a healthy lifestyle; they disapproved of any excess which reduced the strength needed for hunting, the stamina necessary for battle and the fitness required for continuity of family and tribe. Yet when an individual smoked alone, for pleasure, it was usually for contemplative purposes. Social smoking included this contemplative aspect and the elements of social etiquette and religious expression. Hassrick indicates that Lakota social courtesy included offering the pipe to a friend or guest in the lodge, but not before the pipe was first offered to the Four Cardinals, the Earth, the Sky and to Wakan Tanka.⁵¹ Most social conversations were prefaced by this reverent offering and followed by smoking among the participants. While these important preliminary acts—and the silence which accompanied them—often annoyed and disconcerted White people, they were believed by the Lakotas to enhance socialization. Since the spirits of those involved ascended to Wakan Tanka, this shared co-experience enhanced the conversation which followed, increasing meaning and understanding among those who first shared silent offering and smoke.

The second type of Lakota pipe was the personal pipe. Most men owned such pipes and used them for those tribal and personal occasions deemed more important than social smoking. For example, a personal pipe was employed for tribal use when a war party organized; those men wishing to accompany the leader signified their willingness by smoking the leader's personal pipe. Prior to going out, the war party often gave the pipe to a Holy Man to fill, consecrate and seal with buffalo tallow, the pipe thus serving as a strengthening power for war or raiding. If the war party succeeded, the pipe's seal was broken and its contents smoked, sending up the participants' thankfulness for victory.⁵²

Personal pipes were also used extensively for a man's private ceremonies. Unlike Western cultures, where personal rituals are often confined to a certain day of the week, holidays and significant events like marriage or baptism (usually under the direction of a civic or religious leader), Lakota culture recognized such personal ceremonies as an integral part of life. The individual existed in an environment where personal rituals became natural daily

activities, where every act offered opportunity for worship and where every experience opened avenues to Mystery. Such an environment naturally made private ceremonial acts deeply important and spiritually significant. And central, always, to these acts was the personal pipe. If, for example, a man wished to mend a friendship after a disagreement or quarrel, he offered the personal pipe to his friend; through this shared act the smoke quieted angry thoughts and opened the way to understanding, and the two men generated kinship and renewal.⁵³ When a man hunted he generally smoked beforehand, sending to Wakan Tanka his desire for success. After the hunt he again smoked, this time offering thanks to his animal relative for the life-giving meat and gratitude to Wakan Tanka for hunting success. If illness visited a family, a father or relative of the ailing person took the personal pipe to the *wicasa pejuta*, the healer. By smoking the pipe the *wicasa pejuta* signified his willingness to help, and so the process of healing began.⁵⁴ And when, in old age, a man went out on the prairie to review his life, he went alone, taking his personal pipe. There he sat upon the ground and smoked; there musing, often singing a personal song, the aging man sent his thoughts through the pipe and gained an understanding about his place on earth and about his relationship to all his people, past, present and future.⁵⁵ Thus the pipe remained a constant resource, accompanying a man throughout his life—accompanying but never becoming ordinary or commonplace. As the central instrument of a man's private ceremonies the personal pipe provided the spiritual continuity necessary in a culture where personal and tribal continuity assured health and wholeness.

This examination of social and personal pipe use, by no means exhaustive, illustrates the pipe's importance to individual and tribal daily life. Yet the most complete understanding of the pipe's use and importance must come from studying the Lakota ceremonial pipe. Through the Sacred Ceremonial Pipe, the *Canunpa Wakan*,⁵⁶ the religious and philosophical basis for all pipe use—social, personal and ceremonial—finds its most meaningful expression. Lakota ceremonial pipe use is a complex ritual and its understanding depends upon examination of the elements involved: consecrating, filling and smoking. It is to these elements, then, that the discussion now turns.

Because of the ceremonial pipe's sacredness, most Lakotas sought a Holy Man to officiate in the pipe's ceremonial use. Not

every pipe used by a Holy Man was holy, for only a pipe which was carefully and ritually consecrated could be holy. A pipe so consecrated was powerful and was guarded by the Holy Man from everyday use or exposure to anything or anyone disrespectful. Such a pipe was passed from father to son, if the son became a Holy Man like his father. If not, the father kept the pipe and, if he believed death was near, gave the consecrated pipe to another Holy Man. If death came before these arrangements were made, then family or friends asked Holy Men to decide upon the pipe's disposition so that its holiness and efficacy were preserved.⁵⁷

The great care given consecrated pipes included strict rules for proper handling. The Lakotas believed it blasphemous to speak lightly of a consecrated pipe, refer to it directly in conversation, step over it or store it incorrectly.⁵⁸ Touching and smoking a consecrated pipe was a sacred act which could only be done by persons of unquestioned integrity. Any agreement or vow made with the pipe was holy and anyone breaking the vow courted tragedy or death for self or family. Strict rules also kept the pipe from a menstruating woman's presence or handling, since a woman's menses signified a powerful monthly cleansing which would contaminate or weaken the pipe's power. Should the consecrated pipe be desecrated in any way, a Holy man took it to the sweat lodge for purification and renewal. If the pipe remained desecrated, it was buried and thereby returned to the Earth and the ancestors from which it came.⁵⁹ If lost or stolen, the pipe's power had to be nullified by a Holy Man lest its power be used for secular or evil purposes.⁶⁰

Such strict rules for care and handling resulted directly from the pipe's ritual consecration. The complex ritual required that a Holy Man and several assistants gather before a lodge fire. To begin the pipe was filled (the ritual filling to be discussed later) and sweetgrass sprinkled over the fire's coals. The Holy Man handed the pipe to an assistant who prayed to the Spirits of Earth, Air, Clouds, Thunder and Lightning and Water. He then lit and smoked the pipe and handed it to another assistant who called upon the Spirits of the Four Cardinal Directions to give the pipe power over evil. He then smoked and gave the pipe to the next assistant who prayed to the Spirits of War and Peace, Food, Medicine and Sunlight and likewise asked that the pipe gain power over evil. This procedure continued until all present had

prayed and smoked. Then the entire process was repeated, this time with each person concentrating on the pipestem's adornments and praying that the spirits contained therein give the pipe power. Once this process ended, the officiating Holy Man cleaned the pipe's bowl and refilled it.⁶¹

Next, a new fire was built and sweetgrass sprinkled upon it. The Holy Man moved the pipe circularly in the sweetgrass smoke and prayed, naming the Spirits previously addressed and his intention to offer the pipe to Wakan Tanka. This primary intent made known, he lit the pipe, and all participants rose and stood with bowed heads. The Holy Man, holding the pipe in both hands as high as possible, stem upwards, prayed that the requests made to Wakan Tanka through the Sacred Powers be granted. This prayer completed, the pipe was considered consecrated and ready for ceremonial use.⁶²

To comprehend this consecration and indeed, any further discussion of the pipe, it is necessary to understand the reasons for the ritual and the Lakota world view from which the ritual acts arise. First, there are offerings to the Four Cardinal Directions, the number four being a most sacred number. Long ago the Lakotas observed that Wakan Tanka caused everything in the natural world to exist in fours: there are four divisions of time (day, night, month, year); four parts comprise all growing things (roots, stem, leaves, fruit); four things exist above earth (sun, moon, sky, stars); four periods comprise life (infancy, childhood, adulthood, old age).⁶³ This sacred number finds expression in the four ritual puffs of the pipe and in offering to the Four Cardinals: the West, the North, the East, the South. The Four Cardinals encompass everything in the world, and, as defining points of the Universe, they hold great power. Prayers to the Four Cardinals evoke this power and define the participation of all living things in the Universe.

The Lakotas also observed how the Four Cardinals formed a circle and to this day the circle holds a sacred meaning. During the pipe's consecration the pipe's circular movement in sweetgrass smoke represents not just a ritual gesture but a sacred symbol of the Universe, its inhabitants and their relationship—flowing and endless—to Wakan Tanka. As *Lame Deer* says, "Nature wants things to be round."⁶⁴ Long ago the Lakotas saw that man and animal bodies had no corners; the earth, sun, stars, moon and horizon had no corners; indeed, everything

created by Wakan Tanka (except stone—born of Earth, a circle) had no corners. So the circle represents the relationship among Wakan Tanka's creation and this wholeness finds expression in the individual Lakota's lodge, in the village circle of lodges and in the sacred seven campfires of the Sioux nation.⁶⁵ The circle symbolizes all life, then, and all of time in which that life flows without end.⁶⁶

While the number four and the circle are integral to Lakota philosophy, it is necessary to discuss still further how traditional Lakotas perceive the world in order to understand the consecrated pipe's use. For this reason it is necessary to momentarily set aside discussion of the sacred pipe's elements and expand on the Lakota world view. During pipe consecration the prayers to the Four Cardinals and to such Sacred powers as the Earth, Air, Clouds, and Thunder and Lightning are not merely primitive superstition nor animism, although this is the view generally held by Western people. To understand the Lakota world view non-Indians must suspend for the moment the Western, scientific view of the world and try to see how the world can be experienced in other, equally meaningful ways. The Lakotas, knowing that all things were created by Wakan Tanka, believe that everything possesses spiritual life. Everything—not just man, but all elements of the Universe, including stone, air, water (things which Western people believe to be lifeless)—possess a sacred spirit. As such they are entitled to spiritual equality with and recognition from man. Because the elements of the Universe are alive, created by Wakan Tanka and possessed of spiritual equality, it is perfectly reasonable to assume their connectedness to Wakan Tanka. And owing to this connection it is clear to the Lakotas that the Universe's elements are capable of assisting in people's communication to their Creator. This is not superstition; instead, it is a belief which represents a profound respect for life, an understanding which allows the Lakotas to view the elements of life as relatives and as intermediaries in their deepest communication with their Creator. Prayers to the Spirits of the Four Cardinals, the Earth or the Spotted Eagle, for example, do not necessarily constitute worship as White people define it; rather, such prayers are a profound recognition of the spiritual equality inherent in these living things, their power and their manifestation of Wakan Tanka's presence in the Universe.

Whether or not non-Indians can share in this world view, they

can at least try to understand it. To reject these ancient and profound beliefs as ignorant superstition constitutes great arrogance and an extremely limited perceptual ability, something we ignore at our environmental and spiritual peril. Yet whether Western people accept or reject them, Lakota beliefs remain. The Western, scientific view cannot shatter the truth or meaning of Lakota beliefs because their truth and meaning arise not from science but from a racial and cultural experience with the land and the universe.⁶⁷ These beliefs represent reality to the Lakota, a world view as it has been experienced by most Native Americans over eons of time.⁶⁸ This reality is rare in Western experience and is also much older, more enduring and equally as meaningful as Western reality.

Of course the Lakotas are just as capable as Western people of experiencing Western reality and of thinking systematically about the physical world around them. But like other Native Americans they know something additional: They perceive how all parts of the world exist only in relation to each other in interconnected wholeness. In this knowing the Lakotas can experience everything as possessing "the potential for power and life."⁶⁹ They can experience the world from a Western view, i.e., in the things we all see and can objectively measure, but they can also know reality even where it cannot be measured, i.e., in the processes and powers of existence. The *process* of life—not when it happens, nor how long it takes, nor exactly how it is measured—is important and binds people and the universe together.⁷⁰ Since all elements of the universe possess spiritual life and exist together, the Lakotas find it perfectly reasonable that the spiritual world enters into the physical world. This entry is precisely what occurs during Lakota prayers and evocations of the universe's sacred powers and happens when, through prayer, song and ceremony, the pipe manifests the sacred in the physical world.

Of course this view of life differs considerably from Western views where such experiences are considered either insane, mystical or, at best, acceptable only in church services. Nevertheless, this world view has existed for generations, has withstood the White world's education and "civilizing" influence and exists today even among highly educated Lakotas. Yet these beliefs are really not so incompatible with Western thought, except that Western people fail to extend their own thinking to include such perceptions. Vine Deloria, Jr., in *God Is Red*, points out how the Westerner:

. . . misses . . . the rather logical implication of the unity of life. If all living things share a Creator and a creation, is it not logical to suppose that all have the ability to relate to every part of creation? How Western man can believe in evolution and not see the logical consequences of this doctrine in the religious life of people is incomprehensible for many Indians.⁷¹

So any problem of understanding the Lakota world view lies not in its being too alien or superstitious or in its lacking proof; instead the problem of comprehension comes from Western people's very limited experience. Non-Indians have failed to learn the world's duality and thereby to experience the world as both a physical and a spiritual place. Western culture does not yet know the universe as a place where people live in the physical and sacred worlds and experience the manifestation of both in ritual, prayer, song and ceremony.

It was to approach this physical sacred world, then, that the Lakotas carefully consecrated their ceremonial pipes. So consecrated, a pipe manifested the sacred by bridging the physical and spiritual worlds. This bridge formed during the ceremonial pipe's ritual filling and so the filling had to be done with the utmost precision. Filling began with a Holy Man's joining the pipe's bowl and stem. Sealing bowl and stem with sputum, the Holy Man initiated the pipe's power.⁷² Resting the pipe's bowl upon sage in his left hand, the Holy Man reached with his right hand into the pipe bag and took out a pinch of tobacco between his thumb and index finger. He then placed the tobacco in the bowl by quickly lifting the right hand and then slowly lowering it until the tobacco touched the mouth of the bowl. This precise gesture was repeated seven times and with each repetition a prayer was offered to the Four Cardinals, to Grandmother Earth, to Spotted Eagle and to Wakan Tanka.⁷³ These prayers evoked the powers residing in the Four Directions; they summoned the generating and sustaining force of the Earth; they called upon the winged's power as messenger to Wakan Tanka; and, finally, they addressed the most powerful, the Creator. But these prayers were not limited to summoning the powers. Additionally and more profoundly, the prayers told the powers of the special place existing in the pipe bowl: the Four Cardinals, Grandmother Earth, Spotted Eagle and Wakan Tanka—they all were offered a special place within the bowl, within the pipe's heart.⁷⁴ Once

finished placing the seven tobacco pinches in the bowl, the Holy Man tamped the tobacco and sealed the bowl with buffalo tallow or a piece of crumpled sage.⁷⁵ Filled so precisely, the Lakota pipe now contained everything in the universe.

To appreciate the pipe's filling, it is important to understand the symbolic and living reality of the filling process. The pipe enclosed all space (represented by prayers to the six powers and Wakan Tanka) and all things (represented by the tobacco grains), placing them all together in the bowl. The Lakotas did not see the pipe's contents as merely symbolic of universal involvement, although the symbolism is apparent and meaningful; instead, they knew that at the moment of its filling, the pipe "really is, the Universe."⁷⁶ Upon its filling the pipe's small bowl hosted the seen and the unseen, the known and the mysterious, the physical and the sacred, all one family united.

Once the pipe's sacred function began by its filling, the ceremonial smoking could begin. Ceremonial smoking was performed just as carefully as consecration and filling. To begin all participants sat in a circle. The pipe's seal was removed, and the officiating Holy Man held the pipe for the man on his right to light.⁷⁷ Before smoking the Holy Man moved the pipe's mouth circularly. Again the sacred circle figured significantly, symbolic of all life and time but through ritual becoming reality and bringing the power of all life (all generations) together with those who would smoke.

The Holy Man then took from four to seven puffs. Offering the pipestem to the Four Cardinals, he passed the pipe to the person on his left who repeated the process and passed again to his left until all smoked.⁷⁸ If the pipe stopped burning before its contents were consumed, it was emptied and ritually filled again before more smoking occurred.⁷⁹

Once this ceremonial smoking had taken place, the pipe's essential purpose was fulfilled: It held life and the sharing of that life. The ceremonial puffs, like the circle, were symbolic but not merely symbolic. The puffs lived with the breath of humanity and were sent out in all directions and through all time. Just as all creation lived within the pipe's bowl, so all creation rose with the puffs, accompanying humanity's offering to Wakan Tanka. And in the spirit of this offering, in the smoke, the participants shared a togetherness among themselves and with Wakan Tanka. Sword, an Oglala Holy Man, explained in 1896 how

“ . . . the smoke will soothe the spirits of all who thus smoke and all will think alike. When the Lakotas smoke in this manner, it is . . . smoking in communion . . . ”⁸⁰

In the old days the similarity between ceremonial pipe smoking and Christian communion was rarely apparent to White people, whose prejudice prevented admitting the validity of Lakota religion. But the Lakotas saw the similarity and began, early in their contacts with White people, to bridge the cultural gap by explaining the cultural similarities. Luther Standing Bear, in his eloquent *Land Of The Spotted Eagle*, explains the pipe as a:

. . . tangible, visible link that joined man to Wakan Tanka and every puff of smoke that ascended . . . un-faillingly reached his presence. With it faith was upheld, ceremony sanctified, and the being consecrated. All the meaning of moral duty, ethics, religious and spiritual conceptions were symbolized in the pipe . . . the pipe stood for that which the Bible, Church, State and Flag, all combined, represented in the mind of the white man . . . whenever its smoke ascended, men, women and children acknowledged the sacred presence of their Big Holy.⁸¹

Such efforts to use the pipe as a cultural bridge met White resistance. Converting reservation Lakotas to Christianity was the major priority of missionaries but such religious efforts often met with tribal resistance. While Holy Men and traditional Lakotas practiced Christianity to please their conquerors, they also held to their old beliefs, albeit often secretly. In the 1950s and 1960s some Catholic priests began feeling the need to make Christianity more relevant to the Lakotas, perhaps because they thought that more relevance would finally loosen the Lakotas' retention of old beliefs. The Reverend Paul Steinmetz, S.J., a parish priest among the Oglala at Sacred Heart Mission, began this process by personally participating in Lakota ceremonies, hoping to make the link between Lakota and Catholic beliefs more relevant. As his understanding of Lakota beliefs grew Father Steinmetz began to use the pipe in Mass, an act which greatly angered his superiors. He published prayers for use with the pipe, viewing the pipe as a link with God just as Christ linked man with God. Steinmetz's work represented an innovative and daring effort, considering the time, and was a White attempt to link Lakota and Christian

beliefs. The Lakotas, however, saw the link differently; gratified as they were to see Father Steinmetz's efforts, the Holy men wondered why it took Christians so long to figure out what the Lakotas had always known: The Sacred Pipe forms the bridge, connecting man physically and spiritually to Wakan Tanka.⁸² To the Lakotas the link had existed all along and seemed perfectly natural.

And this bridge is perfectly natural. Traditional Lakota society, like all Native American cultures, exists within the physical and spiritual worlds. Spiritual belief is not something arrived at after a long intellectual process but through living experience. Humans, the environment and the powers living in the universe exist together and none experiences life separately. This Native American relationship to the natural and spiritual worlds leads to acts which are, according to N. Scott Momaday, ". . . appropriate . . . as anything could be."⁸³ Like all Native Americans, traditional Lakotas cannot imagine themselves apart from the natural world's powers, and so they act to maintain and strengthen the relationship: They receive life from Wakan Tanka, His creation and the abiding powers therein; so they naturally return that life through the Sacred Pipe ritual, celebrating and returning the life which sustains them. Such actions are profoundly natural responses to the experience of life as a continuity where no clear demarcations between physical and spiritual exist.

The Sacred Pipe, then, forms the bridge between the Lakota world and the Sacred Powers and makes the link a natural one, a relationship where people find a familiar place in the universe. Participation in the pipe's filling and smoking "shatters the illusion of separateness."⁸⁴ Paula Gunn Allen, in her explanation of Native American mythopoetic vision, teaches us the transcending power of myth and her eloquent words can also illustrate the pipe's unifying power. Like sacred myth the pipe creates a relationship to the ". . . grand and mysterious Universe that surrounds and informs . . ."⁸⁵ people; linking the physical and spiritual, the pipe brings an awareness of ". . . other orders of reality and experience, and in that awareness, makes the Universe our home."⁸⁶

And as the pipe shatters separateness and alienation, it also promises life and renewal. Not just a symbol of universal interrelationships, the pipe exists as reality, a living connection between the Lakotas and universal powers. The pipe's smoke and its stem takes one to Wakan Tanka, but the connection goes both

ways. As Lame Deer says, "Power flows down to us through the smoke . . . it moves from the pipe right into your body."⁸⁷ There is living power here for those who will receive it and with this power comes freedom. With every puff upon the pipe one is sent outward, away from earthly confines to the spirit realm, touches the sacred, and experiences the Creator in this physical world. Salvation exists here and now and does not wait upon physical death. In the Sicangu version of the Sacred Pipe legend, White Buffalo Calf Woman promises this salvation, saying, "This pipe is related to the heavens and you shall *live* [emphasis added] with it. . . ." ⁸⁸ So long as the Lakotas keep this pipe, so long as their smoke ascends in prayer, they will live.

Thus traditional Lakotas continue to use the pipe in their daily lives, in their personal rituals and, most important, in their sacred tribal rites. These holy rites represent the most profound tribal ceremonies linking the Lakotas to Wakan Tanka and without them tribal traditions would cease to exist. There are seven sacred rites, consisting of the following: *Tapa Wanka Yap*, The Throwing of the Ball; *Isha Ta Awi Cha Lowan*, Preparing a Girl for Womanhood; *Hanblecheyapi*, Crying-for-a-Vision; *Inipi*, The Rite of Purification;⁸⁹ *Wanagi yuhapi*, The Keeping-of-the-Soul;⁹⁰ *Hunkapi*, The Making of Relatives; and *Wiwanyag Wachipi*, the Sun Dance.⁹¹ When the reservations were established the U.S. Government outlawed these sacred ceremonies so essential to Lakota life, but Holy Men and traditionals secretly continued the rites' observances until the government lifted its prohibition. The sacred rites (and the pipe integral to them) survived, and so the Lakotas survived.

No effort will be made here to explain the pipe's complex use in the seven rites, since any adequate discussion requires an individual, comprehensive study of each ceremony. The pipe's use is richly and complexly interwoven through each rite, and any attempt to discuss its ritual use, isolated from the entire ceremony, would prove meaningless and, worse, would shatter each rite's wholeness and sanctity. What can be emphasized, however, is the pipe's centrality to the seven ceremonies. Since it originated as a spirit gift to be used in the Lakotas' sacred rites, the pipe remains absolutely essential to them. Only through the pipe do the Lakotas express their most profound rites; only with the pipe do they perform these most renewing ceremonies, maintaining themselves as a tribe and as Wakan Tanka's children.

Thus, when a girl child, honored as the center of *Tapa Wanka*

Yap, holds the ball in hand, she sees the everpresent pipe proceeding and initiating the throwing of the ball. And when the Lakotas catch the ball, receiving the universe into their hands, they recognize the pipe as the sanctifying conclusion, the assurance of wisdom and strength through generations to come.⁹² When she is a young girl and begins womanhood by seeking *Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lowan*, she goes before family and Holy Man, knowing the pipe prepares the way, accompanies her beginning steps. When humbly this young woman partakes of the Fruits of Earth, the Water of Life and the Meat of the Buffalo Nation, she knows the pipe sends up her desire for blessedness, binding her to the sacred role as mother to her people.⁹³

When a youth first goes crying-for-a-vision, the pipe accompanies him on his lonely lament. When he fasts and prays the pipe comforts and protects him, uniting him with all others, past and future, who experience *Hanblecheyapi*. As a man when he seeks the *Inipi*, he goes there naked, clothed only with the pipe which carries his cry for rebirth, bathed only with the purifying smoke. And when, penetrated by heat and steam, this man utters the ancient *mitakuye oyasin*, he sings out rebirth, knowing the pipe carries his kinship cry to all relatives for all time.

When a family seeks *Wanagi yuhapi* to keep the ghost of a departed loved one, they seek first the pipe, vowing their desire to remain mindful of death and of Wakan Tanka—the One who sits above death. And when, during the long and rigorous Keeping-of-the-Soul, a family looks for strength, they seek the pipe, finding there a strengthening, comforting power. And when, on the day the cherished soul receives its last meal on this earth⁹⁴ and the family says farewell, they know the pipe sends this soul to Wakan Tanka and brings renewal and hope to those left behind.

When a person wishes *Hunkapi* with another, the taking of the bond closer than kinship, the two involved see the pipe as the power binding them together. When joining as relatives, these two signifying the bond between man and Wakan Tanka,⁹⁵ they know the pipe holds them always, reminding them to walk gently with this bond, nurturing it through all their days.

And, finally, when a man intends sacrifice through *Wiwanyag Wachipi*, he seeks first the pipe, vowing before Wakan Tanka his desire to dance looking at the sun. And when, during the days of preparation and instruction, this man smokes the pipe, he recalls his vow, and the smoke clarifies his will and purpose.

When this man finally dances, sending up voice and soul to Wakan Tanka, he dances willingly, knowing the dance brings life and blessings to his people. With his body, all prayer, pain and praising, he dances enduringly, remembering his vow made upon the sacred pipe. And when he dances, at last giving up his flesh—all he ever possesses—for his people, he dances joyously, holding onto the pipe's sanctifying, strengthening power.

This, then, is the Lakota's Sacred Pipe, the spiritual gift through which tribal generations live. Essential to Lakota life and therefore vulnerable to cultural change, the pipe yet survives, having endured the onslaught of assimilation and "civilization" and remains the transcendent expression of a People's cultural, philosophical and spiritual experience. Through the pipe, this "little piece of stone and wood,"⁹⁶ the people live and experience something wonderful: transcending the physical world, people join their spiritual relatives and, together, they touch the sacred. This is the rich legacy of the Lakota pipe, a heritage which extends to almost all Native Americans. And yet it is a heritage which most non-Indians (either through ignorance or prejudice) fail to understand. Still, a closer understanding remains possible, if we remember the pipe and recognize in it the relationship we all share: a living, spiritual relationship with Earth, with Stone, with the four-leggeds and wingeds, indeed, with all creation and our Creator. And in remembering we may embrace the words of White Buffalo Calf Woman, spoken long ago but living still:

With this sacred pipe you will walk upon the Earth;
for the Earth is your Grandmother and Mother,
and She is sacred.

Every step that is taken upon her should be as
a prayer.⁹⁷

NOTES

1. Black Elk, p. 88.
2. Hartley Burr Alexander, pp. 3-4.
3. William K. Powers, p. 34.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
5. J.L. Smith, p. 89.
6. Francis Haines, pp. 95, 127.
7. Thomas E. Mails, p. 55.
8. George A. West, XVII, pp. 339, pp. 240-253.
9. Haines, pp. 35-36.
10. George E. Hyde, pp. 6-36.

11. Haines, pp. 95, 127.
12. Paul B. Steinmetz, p. 17.
13. Smith, p. 88.
14. Powers, p. 81.
15. Black Elk, pp. 3-4.
16. Ibid., p. 5.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 6.
19. Ibid., p. 7. Black Elk told Brown that two of the rites were already known to the Sioux before the sacred woman came: the sweat lodge purification and the vision quest. At this time, however, the use of the Sacred Pipe was added to these rites.
20. Ibid., p. 9.
21. Ibid.
22. Paula Gunn Allen, p. 5.
23. Paul Tillich, p. 88.
24. Black Elk, p. 7.
25. Adrian C. Louis, p. 1 (cols. 1-5).
26. Smith, p. 90.
27. Steinmetz, p. 17.
28. John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, p. 244.
29. Royal B. Hassrick, pp. 220-221.
30. Smith, pp. 88-89.
31. Hassrick, pp. 220-221.
32. Steinmetz, pp. 17-18.
33. Robert A. Murray, p. 6.
34. Lame Deer and Erdoes, p. 102.
35. John C. Ewers, pp. 11-26.
36. Lame Deer and Erdoes, p. 247.
37. Ewers, pp. 7-12.
38. Mails, p. 56.
39. Peter T. Furst and Jill L. Furst, p. 170.
40. Murray, p. 34.
41. Ewers, p. 28.
42. Furst, p. 171.
43. Editors of Time-Life Books, p. 28.
44. Furst, p. 171.
45. Powers, p. 87.
46. Mails, p. 57.
47. Powers, pp. 86-87.
48. Black Elk, p. 16.
49. Mails, p. 55.
50. Powers, p. 87.
51. Hassrick, p. 284.
52. Powers, p. 87.
53. Mails, p. 56.
54. James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, p. 148.
55. Alexander, pp. 194-195.
56. Powers, p. 87.
57. Walker, *Lakota Belief*, pp. 89-90.

58. Ibid., p. 90.
59. Powers, p. 88.
60. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, p. 90.
61. Ibid., p. 87.
62. Ibid., p. 89.
63. James R. Walker, "Oglala Metaphysics," p. 215.
64. Lame Deer and Erdoes, p. 100.
65. Ibid.
66. Walker, "Oglala Metaphysics," p. 216.
67. N. Scott Momaday, p. 80.
68. Allen, p. 7.
69. Christopher Vecsey, p. 16.
70. Barre Toelken, p. 14.
71. Vine Deloria, Jr., p. 105.
72. Furst, p. 171.
73. Powers, pp. 87-88.
74. Black Elk, pp. 24-25.
75. Powers, p. 87.
76. Black Elk, p. 21.
77. Powers, p. 87.
78. Ibid.
79. Walker, *Lakota Belief*, p. 77.
80. Ibid., p. 83.
81. Luther Standing Bear, pp. 201-202.
82. Powers, pp. 115-116.
83. Momaday, pp. 82-83.
84. Black Elk, p. 21.
85. Allen, p. 11.
86. Ibid.
87. Lame Deer and Erdoes, p. 2.
88. Alexander, p. 23.
89. Black Elk, xv.
90. Powers, p. 93.
91. Black Elk, xv.
92. Ibid., pp. 127-137.
93. Ibid., pp. 121-126.
94. Ibid., pp. 10-30.
95. Ibid., p. 101.
96. Lame Deer and Erdoes, p. 252.
97. Black Elk, p. 6.

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