

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Lakota Belief and Ritual. By James R. Walker. Edited by Raymond DeMallie and Elaine Jahner.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7hx8t579>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 5(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Calvello, Angelo A.

Publication Date

1981-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

people of mixed descent, and whites during a critical two-century period in the history of northern North America.

Jennifer S.H. Brown
Northern Illinois University

Lakota Belief and Ritual. By James R. Walker. Edited by Raymond DeMallie and Elaine Jahner. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, in cooperation with the Colorado Historical Society, 1980. 329 pp. \$21.50.

Until now, access to James R. Walker's copious field notes, interviews, essays, and photos has been limited to his major text, *The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota*, and to several journal articles. These publications represent only a part of the wealth of information Walker procured during his years as physician among the Oglala on the Pine Ridge Reservation (1896-1914). Editors Raymond DeMallie and Elaine Jahner have assembled the totality of Walker's papers (courtesy of the Colorado Historical Society) and selected from them the material for a projected four volumes of which *Lakota Belief and Ritual* is the first. The first three volumes will present Walker's papers in a broad thematic fashion: volume one deals with the beliefs that form the foundation of Lakota way of life; volume two will discuss Lakota mythology; volume three will examine Lakota social organizations and the Lakota conception of time and history. Volume four differs in that it plans to contain the translation of George Sword's personal account of the traditional Lakota way of life (Sword was one of Walker's principal informants). Volume one is the only volume currently available.

Lakota Belief and Ritual (hereinafter cited as *LBR*) is divided into five parts, the first part containing introductory remarks by the editors and two essays by Walker; the remaining four parts contain primary sources.

Part I begins with the editors' biographical introduction to Walker and his papers, focusing particularly on Walker's uncommon personal approach to a study of Indian culture. Unlike other anthropologists of his time (most notably Clark Wissler), scholarship was not the final end of Walker's studies; the doctor did not

compile data strictly for academic analysis. Walker rather saw himself as a curator of Lakota culture, functioning as a recorder of the information the Oglala holy men told him. His studies grew out of his personal involvement with the Indians: realizing that his informants were the last link with traditional Lakota culture, Walker took it upon himself to collect and organize as much information as possible. It is his organization of the material that separates Walker from his peers: Lakota culture was investigated with the explicit intention of ordering and presenting "the legends as a[n] [Oglala] holy man could have given them had he been able to express his ideas in the English language" (*LBR*, p. 50). Part I also includes Walker's autobiographical statement and his account of Lakota mythology. The chapter concludes with a useful review by the editors of related material on Sioux religion.

Part II, "Belief," shows the value of primary sources for an anthropological study. Many of the forty-three documents are discussions and explanations by numerous informants and holy men (George Sword, Little Wound, Thunder Bear, Finger) of the basic abstract concepts of Lakota religion (*Wakan Tanka*, *Kan*, *Nagilapi*, *Taku Skanskan*). Too often such notions are forced (either wittingly or unwittingly) into the monotheistic confines of Western European categories; it is refreshing to read the Indians' own diverse interpretations of these elusive concepts. A good illustration of the ambiguous nature of these concepts is Good Seat's discussion of *Wakan Tanka*:

Wakan was anything that was hard to understand. A rock was sometimes *wakan*. Anything might be *wakan*. When anyone did something that no one understood this was *wakan*. If the thing done was what no one could understand, it was *Wakan Tanka*. How the world was made is *Wakan Tanka*. How the sun was made is *Wakan Tanka*. How men used to talk to the animals and birds was *Wakan Tanka*. Where the spirits and ghosts are is *Wakan Tanka*. How the spirits act is *wakan*. A spirit is *wakan* (*LBR*, p. 70).

Correlated with this elucidation of terms is an explanation of some of the central elements of Lakota religion: the medicine bag (*wašicun*), the vision quest (*Hanblapi*), and the sweat lodge (*Inipi*). George Sword's diligent descriptions of the consecration of the pipe (p. 91) and the treatment of the ill (p. 93) and Thomas Tyon, William Garnett, George Sword, Thunder Bear, and John Blunt Horn's perspicacious discussion of the foundations of Lakota cul-

ture (pp. 100-109) are of particular ethnohistorical value. Also of interest in this section is Chief Red Cloud's abdication speech (pp. 137-40).

Part III consists of the editors' translation of nineteen narratives by Thomas Tyon, a half blood who frequently served as Walker's interpreter. In these documents Tyon describes the ritualistic knowledge of the holy men, stressing the interrelationships among different life forms and how those interrelationships form the basis for Lakota belief about disease and its prevention and cure.

Part IV, entitled "Ritual," includes twenty-four documents explaining the sun dance, *Hunka*, and buffalo ceremonies. Also reproduced are the two paintings of the sun dance by Short Bull mentioned in *Sun Dance* (p. 58) along with Walker's detailed account of one of these pictures (*LBR*, pp. 185-91). The interpretation of the sun dance by various informants in section 63-69 is of interest because of its first-person perspective. The views expressed about the sun dance are in sharp stylistic contrast with George A. Dorsey's explicit account in *The Arapaho Sun Dance* and *The Cheyenne II: The Sun Dance*. Although lacking Dorsey's rigor in explaining the details of the ceremony, Walker's informants do reward the reader with insights into the lived meaning of the ritual.

Part V is called "Warfare." Included among its six documents are Tyon's comments on Oglala men's societies. Also presented are fourteen of Thunder Bear's drawings of Lakota war insignia and Walker's explanation of these drawings. Walker's remarks are of interest in that they exemplify his overall desire to systematize the collected material. In this case, his systematization leads to over-generalizations concerning the standardization of war insignia. Contrary to Walker's claims, it is unlikely that any rigid uniformity existed among the Oglala concerning war decorations; personal achievements tended to dominate the individual's war regalia (See Lowie, *Indians of the Plains*, p. 119).

LBR's value goes beyond the presentation of new anthropological data; it also serves to supplement and verify much of the information contained in *Sun Dance*. The original sources of much of the information contained in *Sun Dance* can be found in *LBR*. For example, the basis of Walker's account of the "Secret Instructions for a Shaman" in *Sun Dance* (pp. 78-92) can be found in *LBR*, pages 93-96, "The Secret Knowledge of Shaman." This provides the critical reader with a means of checking Walker's synthesis of the original material. Likewise, the original texts of Sword's dis-

cussion of *Ni* and Walker's interview with Finger in the *Sun Dance* (pp. 156 and 154-56) can be located in *LBR*, pages 83 and 109.

In a book like *LBR*, the value of the primary sources greatly depend upon the work of the editors. Fortunately, DeMallie and Jahner have done a first-rate job of presenting, organizing, translating, and editing the material. Their overall editorial policy of making the documents readable while at the same time safeguarding the integrity of the text (p. xxii) is quite successful. Accompanying each document are a title supplied by the editors, the name of the informant, the translator(s), the date of the interview (if known). The documents are arranged chronologically under the appropriate heading ("Belief," "Narrative," "Ritual," "Warfare"). This organization, while contrary to Walker's desire for an overall unity, allows the texts to stand on their own, encouraging the reader to reach his/her own conclusions.

DeMallie and Jahner's translation of Tyon's narratives attempt to capture the original spirit of the works; the retention of Tyon's quotatives *ške* ("it is said") and *keyapi* ("they say") help preserve the oral historicity of the document. As a general rule, when translating a sentence that proves problematic, the editors provide the original Lakota along side their translation. A phonetic key is appended to the text.

The one feature of *LBR* that best illustrates the editors' abilities (and is most helpful to the reader) is the annotations. The thoroughness of the notes shows the research that has gone into the text. The endnotes that the editors furnish help to clarify translation problems, explain inconsistencies in the text, and cross-refer the documents with other relevant anthropological sources (Wissler's *Societies and Ceremonial Associations of the Oglala Division of the Teton-Dakota*, Densmore's *Teton Sioux Music*, Gilman's *Use of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region*). In general, these notes situate the material in a larger scholarly context.

The one important omission in *LBR* is a glossary; it would be beneficial to add a glossary of terms frequently used in the text. Such a glossary should be more than simply a list of definitions (this would be contrary to the spirit of the entire book); perhaps it could take the form of an analytic index similar to the one provided in the Shelby-Bigge edition of David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The editors' comprehensive subject/name index in *LBR* may indicate their sensitivity to the problem of vocabulary.

In short, *LBR* offers new important information on a variety of topics central to Lakota culture. The editorship is of the same high quality as the primary sources, thus making *LBR* of great value to both the serious scholar of Lakota culture and Native American religions and the casual reader interested in exploring a way of life that daily appears more and more meaningful to the individual living in contemporary society.

Angelo A. Calvello
De Paul University,
Chicago

The Metaphysics of Modern Existence. By Vine Deloria, Jr. New York: Harper and Row, 1979. 233 pp. pap. \$8.95.

Reading *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* was a perplexing experience. A second reading served only to reinforce the frustration engendered by the first. This is brought about not so much by what the author advances, but by what he ignores. Considering that the author in question is Vine Deloria, Jr., such a situation is truly unusual; not that he has not perplexed others often enough, but because this has seldom been due to his begging of major questions.

Deloria opens his most current work with a rather casual survey of the intellectual "state of things" today. From there he proceeds to postulate a perceived need for the revitalization of collective intellectual energies in order to solve certain problems confronting contemporary humanity. He indicates intent to elaborate a basis for such revitalization, and along the way mentions that he will seek not so much to introduce new theoretical material, but to provide an effective synthesis to existing theory. A quote from Jean-Francois Revel's *Without Marx or Jesus* concerning the need for a revolutionary transcendence of current theory serves to underscore this procedure. Everything may seem to the good at this point, but the seeds of a problem central to Deloria's development of material have already been sown.

Setting aside Revel's rather close relationship with Jean-Jacques Sevant Schribner, an unabashed proponent of a Europe centered corporate-liberal ideology (a factor which tends to offer some