

## Perception and Procedure: The Power of Ritual in *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*

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*American Indians are tribal people who define themselves and are defined by ritual understanding, that is, by spiritual or sacred ceremonial shapings.*<sup>1</sup>

—Paula Gunn Allen

*Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*, the first collaboration between John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, was published in 1972 by Simon and Schuster. Since then, more than two decades have worn on and a few reprints have circulated. Yet *Seeker of Visions* has been largely marginalized by literary discussion. Among the few reviewers and critics, Geoff Sanborn and Kenneth Lincoln provide a retrospective evaluation of the book in terms of its formal unity and its humor. Sanborn identifies Lame Deer's proclivity to group his stories into cycles of four. Sixteen chapters grouped by four gradually unfold religious beliefs and Lakota cultural features, creating "a meaningful structure based on Lakota understanding of numerology and discourse."<sup>2</sup> Lincoln sheds a different light, exploring Lame Deer's humor as a comic discharge inserted into the wider discourse of Indian humor as bicultural product.<sup>3</sup> Still, the book remains peripheral to scholarly attention, good only for quotations.<sup>4</sup>

To tell the truth, the book does not easily accommodate an overall analysis; however, *Seeker of Visions* does find cohesiveness in the Native ritual tradition on which Lame Deer leans. Ritual adds fresh significance to his uproarious life, informs the content, and helps disclose the sacred purpose of the book. Ritual, that is, Lame Deer's ritual-based worldview, explains the dynamics of his life. Thematically, the interrelationship between one particular theme—the remembrance of his grandmother—and its analogues—his personal stance on food, anger, and the meaning of his father's Lakota name—evokes the transformative power of ritual. This interconnection eventually reveals the ultimate significance of the book as an offering to the spirits for mankind's sake.

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I am a medicine man and I want to talk about visions, spirits, and sacred things. But you must know something about the man *Lame Deer* before you can understand the medicine man *Lame Deer*. So I'll start with the man, the boy, and we'll get to the medicine part later.<sup>5</sup>

This explanatory inception apparently runs counter to the nonsequential way the narration subsequently evolves.<sup>6</sup> Rather than rendering the content into a linear scheme, the affirmation resonates with *Lame Deer's* belief that life is a matter of change and evolution developing along a circular path. This basic notion implies that *Lame Deer* considers ritual as the element giving significance to his life.

The circular movement recalls a ritual practice performed by *White Buffalo Woman*: "Then she [*White Buffalo Woman*] walked sunwise, clockwise, around the altar. This represented the circle without end, the road of man from youth to age, from ignorance to knowledge" (p. 242). The Lakota myth tells of this beautiful woman as the bringer of the Sacred Pipe, the Pipe being the empowering center of any ritual or ceremony. But she brought much more than this. Her walking clockwise was the first ritual ever observed but also a metaphorical representation of the universe. *White Buffalo Woman* taught with a simple gesture that the proper way of beginning a sacred performance mirrors the way the cosmos is ordered. Her procedure exemplifies the ritual nature of the spherical evolving of the universe.

The circle *White Buffalo Woman* draws stands for integration, wholeness, and balance. The circle is a connective, timeless bond that encompasses both the physical and the spiritual world and intertwines the essence of every living being. In *Lame Deer's* view, life is inextricably linked to this system. When integrated within this unity,<sup>7</sup> human life participates in the ritual pattern that informs the universe<sup>8</sup> and finds its proper role within this scheme of things. When life veers off this path, an individual feels an oppressive sense of alienation and dislocation. Ceremonial practices are then performed to restore the harmonious balance between the person and the universe. Being able to perceive this relationship means having a ritual understanding of the world and of human existence.

A ritual-based view as such does not imply that human life is static. Rather, the idea of the circle necessarily entails growth and change that pertain to every living thing. Different stages such as birth, youth, old age, and death naturally belong to this order of things, completing and beginning the circle at the same time. Transformation is at the core of ritual just as the Sacred Pipe is at its center.

The concept of the circle may be rendered into the image of a bicycle sprocket. The sprocket is the small-toothed wheel driving the chain that allows the movement. If any of its projections break, the sprocket would no longer be connected to the chain and pedaling would be impossible. In the same way, the ritual movement of the universe depends on the harmonious equilibrium of the whole and on the integrity of each single part. If any living beings interrupt the connection to the whole, the balanced evolving of the cosmos would be hindered.

Lamé Deer's choice to start the book with his early life is congruent with this worldview. The memoirs are the account of the dynamics of his life as he understands them—that is, as an accretion of ritually significant episodes. This is not to say that the narration develops chronologically. Chronology involves linear and fragmented sequences, while Lamé Deer's approach is circular and integrative. Since he perceives his life as shaped by events interweaving with one another and with the ritual motion of the universe, and since the comprehension of "Lamé Deer as a medicine man" ensues the comprehension of "Lamé Deer as a man," it would be misleading to dismiss his youth as a simple "roaming time." His youth acquires relevance because Lamé Deer recognizes it as a phase in the ritual path designated by White Buffalo Woman. To borrow the image of the wheel again, his life may be seen as a wheel with gear teeth, each of them receiving and transmitting motion to the whole. Had one tooth been forgotten, the functioning of the rest would be compromised. As he warns, inattentiveness to "the man, the boy" Lamé Deer would impede a thorough understanding of his life as a whole.

When young and reckless, Lamé Deer was vaguely conscious that he was attending upon the "road" that would bring him to knowledge: "I was uneducated but soaked up knowledge like a sponge. . . . [U]ndigested, it made a big racket in my brain" (p. 68). Knowledge, as he terms it, is more than the sum of the events that conditioned his life. It is a stage reachable when the wheel moves smoothly, so to speak; when life has partaken in the ritual evolution indicated by White Buffalo Woman, "from youth to age, from ignorance to knowledge." Knowledge is Lamé Deer's ritual-based comprehension of his personal changes and of the way they mesh with the universal movement. It is his greater awareness of the thread that weaves his existence with the past of his forefathers and with the future of the generations yet to come. It is a dimension of expanded consciousness that he calls "the great vision," or having a "sense of what it is all about" that pertains to one particular medicine man, the *wičaša wakan*. This kind of knowledge allowed the man Lamé Deer to later become the medicine man Lamé Deer, mentor to numerous younger generations.

In a time when the government had repressed Native religious practices and forced Native Americans inside reservations, Lamé Deer stubbornly pursued his dream (in the Native sense of the term) of becoming a *wičaša wakan*, a holy man. Under such circumstances his training could not possibly be conventional. Between the 1920s and the early 1930s Lamé Deer's learning occurred against a background of devaluation of traditional customs and of alluring white man's ways. Yet he aimed to become a good holy man in spite of sickness, jail, poverty, and alcohol: "Though I lived like a hobo, I was visiting many old medicine men trying to learn their ways" (p. 28).

In an ongoing effort to cultivate his power, Lamé Deer followed different routes, experiencing hard times and immense pain, but considered every fact as an empowering and instructing step. Above all, he learned that the interrelationship between human life and the universe is largely a matter of sacredness. To him, that which is connected is also sacred, but not necessarily perfect. Life is not perfect, and Lamé Deer considers that "[N]ature, the Great

Spirit—[they] are not perfect. The world could not stand that perfection" (p. 68). The Great Spirit has a good side and a bad side exactly like human beings. The centrality of this assumption makes allowance for Lame Deer's personal conception of a holy man as a man who plunges into life to "feel the grief of others," which is another of his definitions of medicine man.

In Lame Deer's thought, a medicine man's behavior should be activated by the desire to honor the spirits and to heal in the proper way, with the caveat that he should experience every condition of human existence to be a good holy man. In other words,

A medicine man shouldn't be a saint. He should experience and feel all the ups and downs, the despair and the joy, the magic and the reality, the courage and the fear, of his people. He should be able to sink as low as a bug, or soar as high as an eagle. Unless he can experience both, he is no good as a medicine man. (p. 68)

In his wandering years, or *oyumni*, he incorporated this religious belief into concrete action almost unconsciously. To his own admission, he passed through different phases of spiritual learning, such as peyote and *yuwipi*<sup>9</sup>, but kept wandering with his pipe: "I was a wanderer, a hippie Indian. I knew nothing then. Right or wrong were just words. If somebody said 'that's bad,' I still wanted to experience it. Maybe it would turn out to be good" (p. 28).

The major trait in this adventuresome attitude recalls a quality of being pertaining to a specific Lakota sacred figure, the *heyoka*, or holy clown. The *heyoka's* sacred function stems from the peculiar ability to embody everything and its contrary regardless of whether it is good or bad. Irreverent and amusing, this unorthodox healer is "somebody sacred, funny, powerful, ridiculous, holy, shameful, visionary" (p. 225).

Although Lame Deer only mentions his job as a rodeo clown, it is reasonable to ascribe his early demeanor to a *heyoka's* mode: "Being a kind of two-faced, I then wanted to find out how it looked from the other side," he concedes (p. 54). In *Seeker of Visions* Lame Deer recounts his youth as a time spent hopping back and forth between the boundaries of the Indian and the white world, bewildering many with a certain degree of personal style and behavior. As a real holy clown he turned things upside down and literally played with stereotypes. He was war soldier and shepherd, peyote priest and *yuwipi* man, tribal policeman and bootlegger, Christian and healer, prisoner and roamer. When forced to attend a white school, he reversed harsh punishments into an ineradicable connection to his traditional upbringing: "I think in the end I got the better of that school. I was more of an Indian when I left than when I went in" (p. 26).

His constant moving around, what he calls "fooling around," seems to acquire the meaning of a spiritual *heyoka's* ceremony that pulled him through difficult years. "This was almost like doing spiritual work. . . . It was in the same nature," he admits (p. 225). The "nature" Lame Deer refers to pinpoints the essence of a holy clown's demeanor. Ritual imputes sacredness to a holy clown's act and governs his behavior. In the figure of this healer, ritual inte-

grates responsibility and seriousness, the ludicrous and the sacred in a dynamic balance. A *heyoka's* performance steps out of the ordinary into the sphere of the sacred because ritual transforms his acts into a healing practice.

Lame Deer does not describe in depth the complexity of a *heyoka's* life. The acceptance of the clown within the Lakota society is clearly linked to the role of this sacred man. The *heyoka* derives his power from the *wakinyan*, four thunderbirds that reconcile the polarities of good and evil, light and darkness. They send lightning and thunder as they may send a dream to a man. The accurate reenactment of this dream, as shameful as it may be, responds to the *heyoka's* primary necessity of acting out his visions and to a precise obligation toward the community. Necessity, obligation, and duty mold into a ritual practice created to reestablish the well-being of the whole group. The ritual enactment of his visions gives a *heyoka* freedom, and freedom would eventually restore his dignity. As a sacred clown, a *heyoka* is expected to behave outrageously to do any good. Paradoxically, he is

an honest two-faced. He works backwards openly. He says "god" when he means "dog" and "dog" when he means "god." You know what he has in his mind. He doesn't say "if I get elected to be a Congressman I'll do this or that." He makes no promises. He has the power. He has the honor. He pays for it all. (p. 235)

Lame Deer's narrative voice in *Seeker of Visions* sketches a portrait of a humorous, visionary man as honest as a "two-faced" who maintained a holy clown's attitude all his life. Much of what is amusing comes indeed from slapstick and outright jokes. Still, any reckoning of *Seeker of Visions* as an ultimately "funny book" begs superficiality and misunderstanding. Throughout the book Lame Deer preserves the bewildering qualities of a witty "upside-down, forward-backward, icy-hot contrary" endowed with great power. Ready to admit his mistakes, he nevertheless reverses the reader's anticipations by candidly confessing episodes of total oblivion by being "drunk as a boiled owl" or skirmishes with angry husbands due to his great "elk power." His constant baffling, common ideas about holy men and Indian medicine display his undaunted *heyoka* attitude: "Seeing me in my patched-up faded shirt, with my down-at-the-heels cowboy boots, the hearing aid whistling in my ear, looking at the flimsy shack with its bad-smelling outhouse which I call my home—it doesn't add up to the white man's idea of a holy man" (p. 147), he seems to chuckle.

Nearly at the end of his life, he still had a holy clown's flair: "This lightning-empowered *heyoka* healer, 73 years-old, taught that nothing was excluded, everything holy," Ken Lincoln remembers.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of the sacredness of all things appears sparsely in the book, and so do other themes. Thematically, *Seeker of Visions* features memories, suffering, humor, adventure, tribal histories, and religious beliefs that expand in circles, each reminding of another in a ripple effect. Although nonsequential, a few themes are bound together by the transformative power of ritual.

Inconspicuous at first, a coalescence of food, anger, and his father's Lakota name jells through the agency of Lame Deer's ludicrous remem-

brance of his grandmother. Their interweaving beckons the reader's attention down a path conducive to the ultimate meaning of the book.

In Native traditions, a ritual act usually wields a transformative power, not so much in terms of tangible objects as in terms of qualitative change. A ritual practice emphasizes unity and integration by reenacting the balance of the circle or by restoring the bond between an individual and the cosmos. To a large extent, it may redirect benign effects toward the whole community.

Lame Deer's grandmother brewed coffee as a ritual offering to the spirits: "Before anything else, Grandma poured a big soup spoon of coffee as an offering to the spirits, and then she kept the pot boiling all day. If she saw people anywhere near the house, she called out to them, regardless of who they were, 'Come in and have some coffee'" (p. 15). The sharing that followed the transformation enhanced the power of the act, secured the presence of the good spirits, and positively affected anybody willing to participate. Her ritual practice helped to keep the balance of the sacred circle and the course of her life within it.

Reminiscent of his grandmother's habit, Lame Deer applies this principle to himself. In the same spirit he offers his own anger, because "anger is something we can share, like food," he explains, "it could turn into love in the end" (p. 81). The context of his offering is his own autobiographical account in which anger becomes love within the narrative structure of the memoirs. Conscious that the transformation necessarily entails the sharing, he remembers the genesis of his family's Lakota name: "[My] father was a very generous man. He always invited people to a feast or a give-away ceremony. At such times he always used to worry about everybody having enough to eat or enough presents. That's why he was known as Let-Them-Have-Enough among the Indian people" (p. 11).

By pulling these associations together, it is accurate to say that Lame Deer engages in the offering and sharing of his life, his anger, his beliefs, and his humorous attitude with any reader willing to take part. As generous as Let-Them-Have-Enough, he transforms his autobiography into a gift to be partaken regardless of color, race, or religion. *Seeker of Visions* is the metaphorical ground on which Lame Deer wants Indians to meet Indians, whites to meet Indians, individuals to meet individuals. The book is Lame Deer's conscious act of donating so that everybody's anger may turn into love. The aim of such a transformation is the reconnection of the sacred circle for everybody's sake via his offering to the spirits.

The interweaving of these episodes within the narrative structure discloses Lame Deer's serious message of peace and healing necessary to the transformation: "[W]e Indians must show how to live with our brothers, not use them, kill them, or maim them," he advises. "[W]e must try to save the white man from himself" (p. 254). The sacred circle depends on the reconciliation of the opposites and on their equilibrium. The white man broke the circle when he came across the ocean and settled on the continent, ravaging, killing, and destroying. The necessity to "save the white man" is Lame Deer's primary thrust toward the recovery of the proper course of the universe and of our lives within it. He considers that mankind is lost on a self-destructive path and sug-

gests that one regain “the red road of the pipe, the road of life” (p. 254) through a collaborative effort: “[T]his can only be done if all of us, Indians and non-Indians alike can again see ourselves as part of the earth” (p. 254). In his view, we all need to understand that we are part of this unity whether we call it earth, circle, or universe. Every created thing is equally important for the well-being of all, as each tooth of the sprocket has a fundamental role in the functioning of the bicycle. If we compromise our existence, we compromise the whole. Still, “we could all form again the circle without end” (p. 255) through the agency of his pipe and his prayers.

With a *heyoka* cant, Lame Deer transfers something performed orally like a ritual onto the written page. Within such a context he tells his life and offers it to make the spirits stay around. He delights in bewildering his readers one last time by playing with the stereotypical image of a holy man. Then he concludes the last paragraph with a crying-for-pity prayer. The supplication illustrates the nexus between his ritual offering and the continuance he asks for mankind:

And so the last thing I can teach you, if you want to be taught by an old man living in a dilapidated shack, a man who went to the third grade for eight years, is this prayer, which I use when I am crying for a vision: Wakan Tanka, Tunkashila, *onshimala* . . . Grandfather Spirit, pity me, so that my people may live. (p. 255)

The title of the book articulates Lame Deer's lifetime search for visions that kept him attuned with the ritual motion of the universe. Visions helped him see his place within the universe, connected him to everything created, and regenerated his bond with the Great Spirit. The final sentence is the conclusive act of a man who entreats the spirits to direct his quest for a “great vision” that may complete the restoration of the broken circle so that everybody may be able to live.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments on this paper.

#### NOTES

1. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 1992), 79.

2. Geoff Sanborn, “Unfencing the Range: History, Identity, Property, and Apocalypse in *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*,” in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 14:4 (1990): 40.

3. Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

4. Geoff Sanborn was the first to point out the habit of quoting excerpts from the book instead of considering its relevance as a whole. In his words, “[T]he book has been treated as if it were a scholarly equivalent of a junkyard car—good for spare parts, but incapable of running on its own” (Sanborn, “Unfencing the Range,” 39).

5. John (Fire) Lamé Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1976), 7. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

6. It is worth noting that the book opens with a chapter describing Lamé Deer's remembrance of his first *inipi* (rite of purification) and *hanblechia* (crying-for-pity or vision quest). The *hanblechia* is a Northern Plains ritual a youth usually undergoes to become an acknowledged adult within the tribe. The last chapter ends with an excerpt from a crying-for-pity prayer. It goes without saying that beginning and end overlap, forming a circular structure.

7. I borrowed the term *unity* from Paula Gunn Allen. She defines this fundamental principle, known among the Plains tribes as sacred hoop or medicine wheel, as "the great principle on which all the productive living must rest, for relationships among all the beings of the universe must be fulfilled; in this way each individual life may also be fulfilled" (*The Sacred Hoop*, 56).

8. The words *universe* and *cosmos* which I use hereafter refer to that unity; they imply the spiritual dimension, or psychic dimension as Paula Gunn Allen terms it, that is as fundamental as the physical world in the concept of the circle.

9. A *yuwipi* man is a medicine man with the power of the rocks. Lamé Deer describes at length the figure of this healer in chapter 11, "*Yuwipi*—Little Lights from Nowhere."

10. Kenneth Lincoln with Al Logan Slagle, *The Good Red Road* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, 1997), 162.