Amerindian: Lakota Sioux

Lakota Self-Sacrifice

Amanda Porterfield

[From The Power of Religion (Oxford University Press, 1998)]

In the soft light of early morning on the last day of July, with the last pink of dawn still visible in her rearview mirror, Cinda Stevens drives west on Interstate go in South Dakota toward the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the home of the Oglala Sioux, the largest subdivision of the western, or Teton, Sioux. Cinda is a nursing student, born and raised in a Midwestern city far from Pine Ridge. Although she has never been in contact with any Pine Ridge relatives, her mother’s grandfather was born on the reservation. Hoping to meet some relatives, and to learn more about their religion, Cinda has decided to visit the annual Pine Ridge sun dance, a Plains Indian ceremony of spiritual and cultural renewal.

The sun dance originated in the eighteenth century, probably among the Cheyenne, and spread to other Plains tribes as a major ceremonial event drawing various populations together for feasting, courtship, religious purification, and ordeals designed to infuse hunters and warriors with experiences of spiritual power. Although it may have continued on in some form in secret, the sun dance in its full form died out among the western Sioux after it was banned in 1881 by the U.S. government as part of its efforts to destroy the “savage” customs of the Sioux and persuade them to accept western culture. But it was reborn in modified form on the reservations, where it emerged publicly after 1934, when the government ban against it was partially lifted. No longer a ritual instigated by hunters and warriors seeking power for future conquests, or seeking to repay the spirits for conquests already made, the sun dance became a ritual of spiritual renewal that helped the Sioux retain their cultural identity and endure the hardships of reservation life.

Along with the Brule, Hunkpapa, Mnikowojus, and other subdivisions of the western Sioux, the Oglala are often called Lakota, which is the name of their language. The Lakota are well known for their resistance to the U.S. Army and to the encroachment of western culture onto the northern plains during the nineteenth century. Today’s Lakota descend from the tribes of the Hunkpapa Chief Sitting Bull, who led the Sioux war of resistance in the 1860s and 1870s, and the legendary Oglala warrior and holy man Crazy Horse, who joined Sitting Bull in defeating General George Armstrong Custer in 1876, killing nearly his entire force at the Battle of Little Bighorn. After this defeat, the U.S. Army conquered the Lakota, killing many, including Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. The Lakota were forced to relinquish most of their lands, give up their traditional occupations of hunting and warfare, and accept dependence on insufficient rations from the U.S. government.

In an attempt to reverse this desperate situation at the end of the nineteenth century, many Lakota embraced the ghost dance, a religious movement promising a supernatural transformation of life on earth, in which the broken and violated world the Lakota had come to inhabit would be rolled away, and the abundant world of the past, with its deceased inhabitants, rolled back in. The ghost dance began among the Paiute Indians of Nevada and swept through a number of western tribes stricken by disease, poverty, and the destruction of their lifeways. Enthusiasm for the ghost
dance declined swiftly among the Lakota after 1890, when U.S. soldiers massacred more than two hundred men, women, and children in Big Foot’s Mnikowojus band at Wounded Knee Creek. Some of the men were wearing ghost shirts, painted with sacred emblems and figures, believed to protect the wearer from bullets. U.S. Army officers regarded these shirts as military provocations.

While forced to abandon their nomadic life as hunters and severely punished for their reputation as warriors, the Lakota retained important elements of their religion, including their spiritual concepts of war and warriors. Other traditional elements that persist in Lakota religion today include belief in Wakan Tanka, the creator God on high who is also a universal spiritual presence encompassing more than four hundred spirits in the Lakota pantheon, and belief in the importance of vision quests and similar forms of religious experience that establish personal relationships between individuals and spirits who bestow power on them. The Lakota also preserve commitment to the gifts believed to be brought to their people by the legendary White Buffalo Cow Woman as a means of communicating with the spirit world, especially the gifts of the sacred pipe, the sweat lodge, and the sun dance.

Since most of the Lakota are Christian (three-fourths of Pine Ridge residents are Catholic or Episcopal), the traditional elements of Lakota religion coexist with Christian belief and experience, and often blend together. Thus Wakan Tanka and the creator God described in the Bible are often understood to be one and the same, and Christian ideas about the redemptive power of Jesus’s suffering confirm the traditional Lakota belief that self-sacrifice can be a means of gaining access to the spirit world. Both Christian clerics and traditional holy men have encouraged linkages between Christianity and Lakota religion, although the clerics tend to view Lakota religion as a preparation for Christianity, while the holy men assume the reverse.

In the 1970s, leaders of the leftist American Indian Movement (AIM) turned to the Oglala Sun Dance Chief Frank Fools Crow and to the life story of the Oglala holy man Black Elk for spiritual instruction. As the religious education of AIM members deepened, the sun dance became increasingly popular among these and other urban Indians, as well as among tourists and religious seekers looking to Lakota religion for inspiration. The sun dance has grown to accommodate this larger sphere of interested people, and now functions as a means of initiation into Lakota spirituality for those on the periphery of the culture, as well as an experience of spiritual renewal and means of affirming and developing Lakota religion for insiders. The sun dance is one of the most prominent expressions of Lakota religion today. Led by men at campsites both on and off the reservations, sun dances attract thousands of spectators each year, and dozens of individuals pledging to participate in traditional ordeals of self-sacrifice.

Like many of her New Age friends, Cinda is interested in Lakota spirituality because of its respect for the environment, and because it seems to offer an alternative to the consumerism, greed, and materialism that she believes are characteristic of American culture. In her view, the Lakota still represent a tradition of spiritual resistance to American culture, even if its military aspect has diminished. Cinda also feels a strong pull toward the people at Pine Ridge because she is a person with some Oglala blood, and she is eager to find the spiritual roots of her mother’s people, and to sink some spiritual roots of her own in alongside.

With these somewhat romantic expectations, Cinda is not fully prepared for either the poverty or the commercialism she encounters when she leaves the Interstate and
drives onto the reservation for the first time. She sees dilapidated homes, rusted-out cars, worn clothes, and a number of shops that look to her like tourist traps selling cheap pipes, fake headdresses, candy, and film.

“I don’t know what I expected to find,” she says aloud, chiding herself for being disappointed. “I guess I was looking for a Garden of Eden. An idyllic village scene with paint horses and a sparkling stream. Something out of a movie about Indians in the nineteenth century.”

Following directions obtained at the Pine Ridge Visitor’s Center, Cinda finds the campsite where the sun dance is being held. It is the second day of the four-day dance, and the campsite is crowded with people, cars, and innumerable tents set up in a large circle almost a quarter mile in diameter. Cinda parks her car and walks toward the tents, intent on observing as much as she can, and also on finding someone she can talk to, someone who will help guide her toward a real experience of Lakota spirituality.

As Cinda remembers from Fools Crow’s account, the sun dance camp involves several concentric areas. The outer circle is comprised of tents and booths, where spectators eat, sleep, and visit, and where food and crafts are sold. Inside that circle are the sweat lodges and preparation tents, where pledgers stay during the four days of the sun dance, praying, fasting, resting, and receiving instruction. This middle circle also includes an open area through which the dancers pass on their way to the innermost circle, and through which spectators pass on their way to the shade arbor encircling the innermost area. The inner “mystery circle,” as it is called, is considered sacred ground, and no one is allowed to enter without permission of the sun dance leaders.

In the center of the mystery circle stands the sacred tree. It was “killed” the day before the sun dance began in a ceremony symbolizing the suspension of ordinary growth and the establishment of a four-day hiatus in ordinary time in which spiritual transformation and renewal can occur. Carefully selected from a stand of forty- to fifty-foot cottonwoods, the tree has been blessed by the sun dance chief, chopped once on each of four sides by a young woman believed to be a virgin, and then cut down by several men and trucked to the sun dance campsite. With thanks to Grandmother Earth for producing it, the tree has been stripped of its lower leaves, planted in a hole in the center of the ceremonial space where the sun dance chief has deposited flesh offerings from his own body, and then hung with pouches of tobacco for the spirits, colored flags representing the spirits of the cardinal directions, and doll-like representations of a holy man and a buffalo that may inspire visions in those who dance. As the focus of the dancers’ religious experiences, the tree creates a sacred world in which power seems to flow between spirits and dancers, and between the dancers who communicate with the spirits and the people.

After inspecting the sacred tree from the shade arbor, Cinda watches the pledgers dancing in the hot sun for more than an hour. Later, she returns to the tent area, stopping at a booth where a middle-aged woman selling leather goods is working on a small fringed bag. The woman looks up in a friendly way, and Cinda plunges in.

"I’m sorry to interrupt you,” Cinda says, “but I wonder if you could tell me where I could find out something about Lakota spirituality.” Surprised by such a blunt request, the woman draws back a few inches and looks at Cinda quizzically, and somewhat dubiously. If outsiders come to the sun dance to be initiated into Lakota spirituality, they do not succeed easily, or without proving themselves worthy.
“My great-grandfather was an Oglala from Pine Ridge,” Cinda adds quickly, hoping to avoid the woman’s dismissal.

“Oh, well, then,” says the woman, her smile returning. “Perhaps you have some relatives here. What was your grandfather’s name?”

The two discuss names and families for a while, and Cinda repeats some of the things her mother has told her about her great-grandfather. The woman directs Cinda to a group of tents across the circle, and suggests that she introduce herself there.

“They might be related to your family,” the woman says. “One of the men over there will be pierced tomorrow. And one of the women may give a flesh offering. They might help you find some of the experience you are looking for.”

Thanking the woman for her help, Cinda moves away, ruminating about the possibility of meeting lost relatives, and apprehensive about suddenly coming close to people whose religious beliefs were leading them to inflict deliberate and considerable pain on themselves. Uneasy, but intensely interested, she resolves to find out more about the religious experiences sought by the pledgers.

Walking around the circle to the cluster of tents the woman selling bags had described, Cinda approaches a man who looks like he might be in his seventies, sitting on a camp stool in front of one of the tents, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, apparently deep in thought. Stopping a few yards away, she clears her throat, says hello, and explains that she is looking for some relatives. He looks her in the eyes for a moment, and then calls into the tent in Lakota. A small boy comes out, followed by his mother and grandmother, who greet Cinda politely. Another stool and some chairs appear, and they all sit together for a while, figuring out Cinda’s relationship, pointing out the tents of other relatives around the circle, and telling stories about those who are gone.

“It is good that you have come during the summer for a sun dance,” the man says after a while, “because the sun dance is traditionally the time when members of the same band come together and join other bands and other tribes. It is a time when the people get together, and the relatives come home.”

Happy at being so warmly included, Cinda describes her desire for a firsthand experience of Oglala spirituality. “I know that I’m just a beginner,” she confesses, “and that you have spent your lives in touch with the spirits and the reality they represent. And I know I have missed out on a lot, in terms of being trained and prepared for a real experience of the spirits. But I would like to go back with something to remember, something I can call on, and build on.”

“There is a lot for you to learn, and you will need to be patient,” the man responds. “The holy men will have to teach you. And the women will have to teach you. You will have to come back here many times to participate in the ceremonies, to learn from the people, and work with them.

“One more thing I will tell you,” he says. “To receive power from the spirits, you must purify and humble yourself. You must be ready to cry to the spirits for help.”

Having pitched her own small tent among those of her newfound relatives, Cinda is awakened just before dawn the next morning by the camp crier, calling the people to the third day of the sun dance, the day that the piercing will begin. After washing and eating, she and the others arrive in the shade arbor in time to see the pledgers file
through the two yellow flags at the eastern door of the mystery circle. Some of the men are carrying pipes filled with sacred tobacco. Many of the men have figures or designs painted on their bodies, and quite a few have red circles painted on their chests indicating the spots where they will be pierced. They move clockwise around the mystery circle, stopping before the sun dance altar, located at the west of the circle, facing the rising sun. After placing their pipes alongside the altar, the pledgers sing, “Tunkashila, Grandfather, have pity on us. We have come here and are doing this so that everything will be right with us.” The tension among the spectators is palpable, and some of the pledgers’ relatives begin to cry, their sobs contributing to the petition to the grandfather spirit to infuse the pledgers, and their people, with spiritual power. One of Cinda’s cousins points out his brother Ben, who has pledged to be pierced. Ben hopes to receive power from the spirits so that he can bring strength to his people as an ambulance driver, paramedic, and someday, he hopes, as a religious healer.

Moving to the north and then to the south, the pledgers sing and dance, raising their hands occasionally in appeals to Wakan Tanka or the guiding grandfather spirit Tunkashila, reaching up to touch their spiritual power and feeling it run down through their arms. Many participants in the sun dance believe that this contact with the spirits gives the dancers powers of healing, and at a certain point in the morning, the sun dance chief admits a number of individuals who are sick or injured into the mystery circle to be blessed by the dancers. Through simple acts of touching, the dancers generate hope in these individuals, as well as feelings of being infused with holy power. After the healing blessings have been performed, Ben’s older half-sister May asks permission to enter the mystery circle to make a flesh offering.

As a woman, May cannot be pierced. But she can smoke the sacred pipe, purify herself in the women’s sweat lodge, receive instruction from the religious leaders of the sun dance, and pray and dance to the spirits, to Grandmother Earth, Tunkashila, and Wakan Tanka. And she can make a flesh offering.

May is inspired to make this self-sacrifice as part of her recovery from alcoholism. She needs help from the spirits to be a good influence on her children and nieces and nephews, and to go back to school so that she can get a good job and be a strong member of her community. And as in the other ordeals of the sun dance, the power May may receive as an individual as a result of her self-sacrifice is not a gift for her alone, but one that will benefit her community. As the older women explain it, the spirits might give power to the people through her.

Now within the mystery circle, May dances and sings, reaching her arm up to Wakan Tanka, and then down to Grandmother Earth. Feeling her weakness and fear like a presence inside her, May wants intensely to focus her life, find direction, and break through her fear. She cries to Wakan Tanka for help and strength. As the sun dance chief directs her to a spot on the ground near the altar, May tunes in on the drums, and allows their sound to fill her consciousness and expand her senses, so that the beat of the drums and the beat of her heart seem to be one, and she feels life in the ground beneath her, holding and lifting her toward the sky.

The chief sits down cross-legged on the ground next to her, takes some grey powdered medicine from a bag, and rubs it on the outside of her upper left arm, where May indicates she wants to take her flesh. He hands her a sharp razor. Using the thumb and index finger on both hands he pinches her skin tightly in two places about two inches apart, raising the skin away from the muscles. With little hesitation, May makes the appropriate cuts and lifts out a small rectangle of skin. The chief rubs
more medicine on her wound, takes the piece of flesh she gives him, and places it respectfully in another pouch, where he will keep it until he places it on the altar as a gift to the spirits. As he helps her stand up, May becomes aware of her weakness and then feels it flowing out of her as her body begins to sway. Moved by gratitude, relief, and happiness, she feels a new strength flowing into her body. The drums beating through her, she begins to dance, tears flowing down her cheeks, left arm lifted to the sky.

Later that day, Ben and a dozen other men are pierced. The holy man attending Ben makes two incisions on both sides of his chest, inserts wooden skewers under the skin on either side, and ties ropes to the skewers. Dazed from the piercing, and from two-and-a-half days without food or much water, he gets to his feet slowly, his head bent, his shoulders drooping. He follows his guide, who holds the loose ends of the ropes in his hands, walks closer to the sacred tree, and fixes the ropes in the fork of the tree above their heads. This task completed, the holy man begins blowing an eagle whistle, and Ben lifts his head up and steps backward, pulling against the ropes affixed to his chest, strengthened by the sound of the whistle and the feeling of spiritual power it invokes. Taking up his own eagle whistle, he blows it repeatedly, calling to Tunkashila. The sun shines through the leaves of the sacred tree above him, and through the hoop held by the figure of the holy man hung in the branches, which becomes for Ben a visible expression of the circle of people drawn in union and support around him. He feels exalted and strong. The skewers in his chest break through his skin and he stumbles backward, free.

The next day, other men are pierced for two different ordeals. Several are pierced in both breasts and in the center of the chest and then suspended a foot off the ground from ropes tied to four posts. One of the men dances, shoulders turning and feet stepping in the air as the drums beat and the sun dance chief blows his eagle whistle. Cinda, her relatives, and all the people around them stand transfixed by the man’s apparent communication with the spirit world.

Also on the fourth day, several men are pierced and attached with ropes to buffalo skulls. For some spectators, this is the culminating ordeal, and the courageous efforts the pledgers make to break free of the heavy skulls dramatize a common experience of life. Many of the spectators and pledgers have been pulled down by life, and the life of their people has been pulled down by many weights—poverty, unhappiness, bad health, untimely deaths, poor education, and lack of opportunity. The dancers drag the skulls across the ground, and when they weaken visibly, the sun dance chief invites children into the circle, who sit and ride on the skulls, adding weight to help the dancers in their struggle. Amidst encouragement and wailing from all sides, the dancers finally tear free, living symbols of the victory of their people.

As a witness to this culminating act of courage and self-sacrifice, Cinda feels that she, too, has been infused with the power of the spirits. She has also come to feel the strength of the Oglala people. As one who has begun to experience the power of the sun dance for herself, Cinda finds herself identified with the Lakota community and its ongoing effort to survive.

***