

Robert W. Brockway  
Brandon University

## THE ORIGINS OF OGLALA DAKOTA RELIGION

Joseph Campbell speaks of the "Twilight of the Great Hunt," referring to the culture of the North American Plains. According to him, Franco-Cantabrian Aurignacian culture is echoed in the buffalo jump, sacred pipe, sun dance, and medicine wheel.<sup>1</sup> He finds archaic Animal Master motifs in the Blackfoot myth of the girl who marries the buffalo bull and is taught the life-restoring buffalo dance. He also finds hints of the Eurasian Paleolithic in the Oglala Lakota myth of White Buffalo Maiden and the Gift of the Sacred Pipe<sup>2</sup> The late Mircea Eliade found paleolithic mythic significance in the widespread mythic motif of the animal who is sent to the bottom of a lake or the sea to bring up the soil from which the world is made.<sup>3</sup> With variations, this myth recurs throughout North Eurasia and North America.

Neither Campbell nor Eliade are highly regarded in rigorously academic circles, partly because they rely heavily on secondary sources and partly because they are generalizers. However, if one goes behind their generalizations to their secondary sources, and from these to the documents, as I do, Campbell is usually quite reliable. Eliade is much less so. He did not keep up with developments in archaeology and anthropology. Campbell does. At the same time, few archaeologists and anthropologists are well informed about psychology and religion. The insights of generalists in the field of Religion scholars are therefore important. The study of archaic religion demands up-to-date knowledge in depth of anthropology, archaeology, biology, and psychology, as well as the phenomenology of religion. Campbell is one of the very few who does so. I try to do the same.

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1. Joseph Campbell, *The Way of Animal Powers, An Atlas of Mythology*, Vol. 1, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983., pp. 193ff.
  2. Campbell, *The Masks of God, Primitive Mythology*, Vol. 1, London and New York: Penguin Books, 1979 (1959)., pp. 282-5.
  3. Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis The Vanishing God*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 1972 (1972)., pp. 76ff.

The idea that interests me is whether or not the ultimate origins of a Plains Indian religion such as that of the Oglala Lakota can be traced to the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Paleolithic. The earliest clues concerning Paleoindian Religion go back to burial sites, to the discovery of non-utilitarian ornaments which could have been for ritual purposes, petroglyphs, and medicine wheels, some of which are from two to four thousand years old.<sup>4</sup> By then, the descendants of the Pleistocene migrants from Siberia had been in North America at least fifty thousands years. We know that the Clovis and Folsom people of the ninth and tenth millennia B.P. were mammoth and buffalo hunters who drove herds of large animals off cliffs,<sup>5</sup> that they were nomads who wandered the plains in small bands. But we cannot insist that the hunting practices of the jump and corral were introduced by Asiatic migrants even though the same practice is known to have been used in Northern Eurasia in Paleolithic times. We have no idea what myths and rituals Clovis and Folsom people had.

During what some archaeologists call the Postarchaic Period (from around 1000 B.C. to the time of European Discovery) the plains were arid and, during the earlier millennia of that era, the bison herds diminished. Also, the great bison of Post-Pleistocene times vanished, probably hunted to extinction, and were replaced by the smaller bison of today. The ancestors of the Crow, Arikara, Blackfoot, Hidatsa, and others have been on the Plains for at least four hundred and fifty years. The medicine wheels, some of which have been radio-carbon dated to around 2000 B.C., were probably significant in religious rites, the nature of which remain unexplained save that they appear to have been astronomical instruments. We do not know the origins of the Sun Dance, Sacred Pipe, the concept of Wakan Tanka, as the Dakota term it, or any other feature of Plains Religion. However, all Plains Peoples practiced variants of the same basic religion at the time of discovery.

It is known from French sources that the Sioux or Dakota people originated in the woodlands of the Ohio Valley, migrated westward because of the pressures of warlike neighbours, and that they occupied the Mille Lac region of Minnesota during the Seventeenth Century. During the latter part of that century, the hostility of the Chippawas,

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4. Carl Waldman, *Atlas of the North American Indian*, New York and Oxford: Facts on File Publication, 1985., pp. 6f.

5. George Frison, *Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains*, New York: Academic Press, 1978., pp. 243f.

who had access to French firearms, drove a branch of the Dakotas the Tetons, on to the prairies. The Tetons, in turn, were divided into seven groups, including the Oglalas. The Tetons became nomadic buffalo hunters, first using the buffalo jump, and then, after 1750, the horseback chase. During the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, they appear to have adopted the religious beliefs and practices of peoples already on the plains.

Most of what we know about Dakota Religion is from native informants, such as Black Elk and Standing Bear, who were interviewed by Americans such as James Walker and Joseph Neihardt. Too, there are a few mid-nineteenth century reports by missionaries and travellers but usually too biased or fragmentary to be of much value. The elders maintained that rites, such as the Sun Dance, were ancient but, as oral traditions are seldom reliable past the third generation, it is impossible to say just how old the rite really is.

On purely circumstantial evidence, I would hazard the guess that the idea of *mysterium tremendum*, which the Oglala Lakota express as Wakan Tanka, is very archaic, and that it originated in Eurasia in Paleolithic times. Concepts such as the sacred tree, sacred mountain, and *descensus ad inferos*, are probably exceedingly ancient. They parallel Shamanic concepts in North Eurasia which, in turn, are thought to have Paleolithic antecedents.

As a metaphysical principle, Wakan Tanka (variously translated as Great Mystery, Great Sacred, or Great Spirit) is as complex and profound as any ontological concept encountered in the so called "higher religions." Wakan Tanka is unmanifest pure being as Grandfather, much like Tao in Chinese thought. As Father he is manifest as Creator, Preserver, Destroyer, very much like Siva in Hindu thought or the avatars of Vishnu, the Persons of the Christian Trinity, or the Seven Amesha Spentas of Ahura Mazda of Zoroastrianism. As Grandmother he is the Ground of Being of the Cosmos, as mother the elan vital, life itself.

The modalities of Wakan Tanka are numerous and hierarchical, one of the highest modes or hypostases being Wambli Galeshka (the Spotted Eagle), because the Lakota believe that the eagle flies higher than any other bird. He is also revealed in the Person of the Sacred Woman, variously called White Buffalo Cow Woman, White Buffalo Calf Woman, or Buffalo Maiden. Metaphysically speaking, she is Whope, the Beautiful

One, Wakan Tanka in the modality of a beautiful young maiden. She is the Archetypal Buffalo incarnate. Before her coming, the Oglala Lakota practiced the ritual purification of the sweat lodge and Hanblecheyapi, crying for a vision. She gave them the Sacred Pipe, revealed the rite of Keeping the Soul, or the death sacrament, to them, and promised that four more rites would be revealed to them in due course. It is also Oglala Lakota belief that a Sacred Buffalo stands in the west. Each year he loses a hair and each era a leg. When the buffalo of the west is legless and bald the age will end in catastrophe. The Buffalo Maiden will come again and a new age will begin. The Buffalo now stands on one leg and is almost bald.

Wakan Tanka is manifest in Grandmother and Mother, Grandmother is Earth or the Cosmos in terms of its vitalities, Grandmother is the ground of all growing things. Mother is the vital principle of growth itself, Cosmos in its aspect as the producer of all growing things. All two-leggeds, four-leggeds, wingeds, and other living beings are related to one another and are Wakan Tanka. Thus, Wakan Tanka is all that is sacred in the collective or universal sense.

In Oglala Lakota Religion, it is incumbent that all people walk the Red Road which is symbolically from the South, which is the Source of Life to the North, which is Purity. All must avoid the Black or Blue East-West Road which is evil. To enable the Oglala Lakota to walk the Red Road, Wakan Tanka revealed the way to them through the mysteries of the Sacred Pipe.

According to Oglala Lakota tradition, the Sacred Pipe was given to them by a White Buffalo Maiden in the person of a beautiful young woman in white buckskin who appeared to two hunters on the prairie. One of them was sexually aroused and was turned into a skeleton infested with snakes. The other was sent to Standing Hollow Horn, the chief, with instructions for him to build an assembly lodge and gather the people. The Maiden appeared, entered the lodge, moved around it sun-wise, and then took a calumet from the medicine bundle on her back. As she explained, the wooden stem symbolizes all that has life and grows, the twelve eagle feathers that hung from where the stem joins the bowl stand for rays of the sun, for Spotted Eagle, Grandfather, Father, The Real Presence and Ground of Being. The red stone bowl of the pipe is Earth or Cosmos, symbolically Grandmother/

Mother. The buffalo calf carved on the red stone bowl is the symbol of all four-leggeds. The life of the Lakota People was based on the buffalo which supplied their food, clothing, the hides from which they made their tipis and much else. All living beings partake of the Buffalo in Oglala Lakota doctrine. Thus, to eat a certain portion of the shoulder in a sacred manner is to commune with Wakan Tanka. The rite is somewhat like Holy Eucharist in Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

The Sacred Pipe is what the cross is to Christianity or the T'ai Chi to the Chinese. It is the sacred symbol of the universal order, of the eternal, the Ground of Being in all its modes, modalities, manifestations, and hypostases.

Though neither archaeology nor anthropology provide us any hard data for the prehistoric stages of Plains Indian Religion, it is impossible that such a complex religion as their's was of recent origin. Oglala Lakota Religion is not a primitive religion but as deep and complex as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism or Vedanta. It had to have an immensely long antecedence. In my view, the depth psychologists, and especially the school of Analytic Psychology of C.G. Jung, offer the best insights. Whether we call them Elementar Gedanken (Bastian), representations collectifs (Levy-Bruhl), archaic heritage (Freud), hierophanies (Eliade), or archetypes of the universal psyche (Jung), there are undoubtedly certain motifs, ideas, and symbols which are collectively of psychic origin. They emerge in what Campbell aptly calls mythogenetic zones. By this he means horizons within which common experiences repeated over long periods of time give rise to trans-personal symbols and myths which are shared by people within certain geographical areas. The North American Plains is a mythogenetic zone. Nearly all of the Native Peoples of the Plains followed variants of the same basic religion just as they spoke variants of the same language.

On the whole, I agree with Campbell's theory that the Twilight of the Great Hunt occurred on the North American Plains. Dusk descended a century ago when the buffalo were hunted almost to extinction. With the passing of the buffalo went the way of life which had began nine or ten thousand years ago at the close of the Wisconsin (Wurm) glaciation of the Pleistocene. But even that way of life undoubtedly had its antecedence.

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6. *Black Elk Speaks*, Joseph G. Neihardt, New York: Pocket Books, 1979 (1932)., pp. 1-5.

It is generally agreed that Paleo-Siberian hunters followed big game across Beringland when it joined Eurasia and America. They shared a common way of life as nomadic hunters which much resembled that of the Aurignacians of thirty thousand years ago and the even more archaic Neanderthal People before them. The ancient hunters invented religion. It was probably based on the psychological dilemma caused by having to kill the most beautiful beings they knew in order to live. To all nomadic hunters today, and presumably to those of the past, animals and human beings are all people. The Oglala Lakotas therefore call animals Four Legged People, human beings Two Legged People, birds Winged People, and trees Standing People. All are of the same Mother and Grandmother and of the same Father and Grandfather. To find the origins of this belief we have to go back to the cave temples of Province and Cantabria during the Upper Paleolithic Era, to the Neanderthal cave bear hunters fifty to one hundred thousand years earlier, perhaps to Homo Erectus, Homo Habilis, and Australopithecus. Thus, while particular myths and rites are ever-changing and very from tribe to tribe, the underlying motifs undoubtedly have very archaic antecedence.

In Oglala Lakota Religion we encounter a central epiphany which corresponds to the Crucifixion and Resurrection in Christianity, the Exodus and Sinai in Judaism, the Epiphany of the Angel Gabriel to Mahammed in Islam, or the epiphany of Vohu Manu to Zoroaster. White Buffalo Maiden is the highest disclosure of divine to the Oglala. She revealed the seven rites of the Sacred Pipe: These are the Keeping of the Soul, Inipi: The Rite of Purification, Hanblecheyapi: Crying for a Vision, Wiwanyag Wachipi: The Sun Dance, Hunkapi: The Making of Relatives, Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lown: Preparing a Girl for Womanhood, Tapa Wanka Yap: The Throwing of the Ball.<sup>7</sup> These sacraments are the central motifs of Oglala Lakota Religion. They are the way to walk the Red Road.

The Sacred Pipe and White Buffalo Maiden are of central importance in the four day rites of the Sun Dance which, despite its name, is not Sun Worship but "Gazing at the Sun." The latter refers to the ascetic practice of staring at the sun from dawn to dusk as part of the self torture which participants in the Oglala Lakota Sun Dance undergo. The Sun Dance

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7. *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown, London and New York: Penguin Books, 1977 (1953).

is held in June or July, just after the full moon, and, in the past was the one occasion of the year during which all of the scattered nomadic bands come together for counsel and religious rituals as well as to prepare for war or to build buffalo corrals. Virtually all of the Plains people celebrate the Sun Dance but no two peoples in the same way or in terms of the same mythologies.

It is clear that the Oglala Lakota adopted the Sun Dance from others, presumably neighbours such as the Crow, Shoshone, or Hidatsa. The Crow and Dakota are enemies, but that need not have prevented cultural borrowing. Margot Liberty thinks that the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara shaped the Sun Dance in its early form but not in its final forms. She suggests that the Sun Dance, as observed during the last century, was of very recent origins; about the time that Plains People acquired the horse. The earliest report of the Sun Dance was by Charles Mackenzie in 1805, who called it the "Great Festival of the Plains."<sup>8</sup> Fred Voget thinks that the Sun Dance originated among the Crow and their relatives, the Hidatsa, that it was originally a rite of self-mortification of mourners. Crow narratives are not clear concerning the origins of the Sun Dance and all mythic and legendary accounts appear to be fairly recent. The stories of Kablaya and White Buffalo Maiden strongly suggest collective tribal conversion through shamanic visionary experience. In any case, the Oglala Lakota were latecomers to the plains and probably did not practice either the Cult of the Sacred Pipe or the Sun Dance until their westerly migration. There are no recorded references to the Sun Dance by European travellers prior to the Eighteenth Century. It is possible that the Sun Dance originated then and spread rapidly through the Plains. Twenty Plains tribes practiced the Sun Dance during the Nineteenth Century.<sup>9</sup> Features such as the Sun Dance tree and its symbolic role as axis mundi tempt one to trace at least some features of the rite to Paleolithic times, even to Eurasia. However, even in Siberia, the sacred tree as axis mundi is comparatively recent, and appears to have been introduced from India or Central Asia by Buddhists. Authorities on Siberian shamanism are unable to trace very much to pre-Buddhist times though, presumably, shamanism itself was

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8. Margot Liberty, "The Sun Dance" in *Anthropology of the Great Plains*, Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1980., pp. 164f.

9. Fred W. Voget, *The Shoshoni-Crow Sun Dance*, Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1984., pp. 79ff.

much older.<sup>10</sup> Still, having conceded this point, the high probability remains that the idea of the Absolute Center or Axis Mundi, symbolically disclosed in a tree or mountain is undoubtedly very archaic and probably originated during the Paleolithic. Among the clues to the extreme antiquity of Shamanic religious concepts are X-Ray animal paintings which occur in Franco-Cantabrian cave temples. They also occur in children's art and in that of schizophrenics.

My own thought is that while most phenomenological features of Oglala Lakota Religion are of recent derivation, the underlying motifs are extremely archaic and originated in middle and Upper Paleolithic Eurasia. Thus, the specific role of Harney's Peak as the Axis Mundi in Black Elk's Great Vision may well be based on traditions which go back no further than the late Eighteenth Century when the Lakotas drove the Crows from the Black Hills. But the idea of axis mundi was probably in the minds of Folsom and Clovis hunters eight thousand years before millennia and, before them, in the minds of the earliest migrants across Beringland from Siberia. It is highly probable that the Clovis and Folsom Peoples, and their ancestors, transmitted mythic and ritual motifs which were ultimately derived from those of their Aurignacian ancestors forty and fifty thousand years ago. Too, the long prehistory of bison hunting on the plains, paralleling an even longer Great Hunt in Eurasia, suggests the antiquity of such motifs as the conception of the buffalo as the symbol of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

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10. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974 (1964), Bollingen Series LXXVI, pp. 6f.