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Mitákuye Owás'į (All My Relatives): Dakota Wičoni (Way of Life) and Wičozani Wašte (Well-Being)¹

Mark Ruml

Introduction

[Mitákuye owás'į] is a single prayer by itself, if there is a group having a ceremonial gathering, whether it is a sweat lodge, or a night ceremony; but it also comes at the end of most prayers. Mitakuye oyasin: “All my relatives—I am related to all.” It’s a closure, a recognition of relationship. (Amiotte 1990, 49)

Mitákuye owás'į (abbreviated locally in Manitoba, Canada, as mitákuyowás and pronounced “Oyás'į” in the Lakota dialect) is a profound expression of Dakota religiousness; “a single prayer by itself,” but one that is also uttered at the end of most, if not all, prayers. The meaning of this expression points directly to what it means to be religious, to be human. It reflects a fundamental cosmological orientation that forms the basis of how human beings, ideally, should think, act, and relate to one another, to the natural world, and, ultimately, to the cosmos, the totality. All aspects of Dakota religious life reflect mitákuyowás; the sacred narratives, traditional teachings, and ceremonies are directed towards actualizing the principles inherent in mitákuyowás. The basic social unit in Dakota society, the *tiyošpaye* (extended family unit), is grounded in this orientation, and economic relations are guided by it. The following article will detail how this cosmological orientation is expressed in the Dakota religious tradition, the Dakota *wičoni* (way of life). Mitákuyowás will be shown to be a fundamental religious principle, grounded in the cosmology, connected linguistically to the word for “to pray,” and expressed in other aspects of the cumulative tradition: through ceremonies, the pipe, tobacco, feasting, the giveaway, dancing, singing, the kinship system (the *tiyošpaye*), and the economic and political spheres. According to my understanding of Dakota thought, internalizing and living ones life according to the principles and cultural values inherent in the mitákuyowás perspective leads to well-being, to *wičozani wašte*, “the good life.” I will conclude by noting how individual and community well-being is being restored through the revitalization of Dakota spiritual traditions in Manitoba. The importance of the mitákuyowás concept for policy development will also be addressed.

The source material for the understanding of Dakota world view presented in this article consists of written texts (published and unpublished), oral teachings (given by elders and traditional people), and observing and participating in

ceremonies (such as the sun dance, sweat lodge, and memorial ceremonies, among others) and social gatherings. Methodologically, it follows Wilfred Cantwell Smith's verification process known as "corporate-critical self-consciousness." In corporate-critical self-consciousness the results of our study are verified not only by our fellow academics, but also by the people from the tradition we are attempting to understand (Smith 1981).

Dakota Kinship System: *Tiyošpaye*

The primary human social unit in the Dakota Oyáte (Dakota Nation) is the *tiyošpaye*, the extended family. As Lakota anthropologist Ella Deloria explains, the word *tiyošpaye* "is essential in describing tribal life. It denotes a group of families, bound together by blood and marriage ties, that lived side by side in the camp-circle" (1944, 40). According to Deloria:

Kinship was the all-important matter. Its demands and dictates for all phases of social life were relentless and exact ... By kinship all Dakota people were held together in a great relationship that was theoretically all-inclusive ... I can safely say that the ultimate aim of Dakota life, stripped of accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must be a good relative. No Dakota who has participated in that life will dispute that. In the last analysis every other consideration was secondary—property, personal ambition, glory, good times, life itself. Without that aim and the constant struggle to attain it, the people would no longer be Dakotas in truth. They would no longer even be human. To be a good Dakota, then, was to be humanized, civilized. And to be civilized was to keep the rules imposed by kinship for achieving civility, good manners, and a sense of responsibility toward each individual dealt with. (1944, 24–25)

The formal rules of correct kinship behaviour require that specific forms of address be used when speaking to different members in the kinship system.² For example, the men who are addressed as "father" are those who are addressed as brother or cousin by a person's father. These forms of address are accompanied by appropriate attitudes and behaviours towards each kin. According to Deloria:

The core of the matter was that a proper mental attitude and a proper conventional behaviour prescribed by kinship must accompany the speaking of each term. As you said "Uncle"—or "Father" or "Brother"—in either address or reference, you must immediately control your thinking of him; you must assume the correct mental attitude due the particular relative addressed, and you must express that attitude in its fitting outward behaviour and mien, according to the accepted convention. (1944, 29–30)

Therefore, there is more to being a good relative than respectfully using appropriate forms of address; one must even control one's thoughts or mental attitude. Using the correct form of address and controlling one's thoughts and mental attitude are ways of showing respect. As Luther Standing Bear says, "The rules of polite behaviour that formed Lakota etiquette were called *woyuniḥa*, meaning 'full of respect'; those failing to practice these rules were *waohola šni*, that is, 'without respect,' therefore rude and ill-bred" (1978, 148; emphasis added). Mutual respect (*ohokîlapi*) and reciprocity are the underlying principles to be adhered to in order

to be a good relative, to be human, to be religious. In Dakota or Lakota society, the individual who fails to follow the rules of polite behaviour is disrespectful, neglects proper kinship behaviour, is less than Dakota, less than human.

Kinship: Economic and Political Relations

The foundational influence of a relational perspective also extends to economic and political relations with individuals who are not born into a Dakota family. The historical record reveals that in all interactions (relationships) with Europeans, the Dakota would conduct a ritual that would constitute a kinship bond; referred to in anthropological terms as “fictive” or “social” kinship. The missionaries, traders, government representatives, and other non-Dakota people had to be situated through ritual adoption into the Dakota kinship system. When Hennepin, Duluth, Radisson and Groseilier, Carver, American government representatives such as Pike, and the missionaries such as Pond, Riggs, and Williamson met the Dakota, they were fitted into the Dakota kinship system, and a relationship was established.³ When Hennepin and his two canoe men Michel Accou and Picard du Gay met up with a group of Dakota men in 1680, they were subsequently adopted by the Dakota (Hennepin 1903).

In *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley 1650–1882*, Gary Clayton Anderson examines the Dakota’s relationship with the missionaries, traders, and others from the relational perspective of the Dakota kinship system. Anderson concluded that the Minnesota Conflict of 1862 was a response to the culmination of years of kinship transgressions. As Anderson points out:

Friendly relations were based upon a system of reciprocity and kinship that traders and government agents like Taliaferro continued well into the nineteenth century. Their treaties of 1830, 1837, and even 1851 expanded these well-established reciprocal patterns, and the eastern Sioux came to believe that the government would take care of all their needs. But once the Indians were on the reservations, the promises of assistance initially fell short of expectations and eventually proved limited to those who nominally became whites. Thus the treaties became instruments of cultural change rather than reinforcers of reciprocal friendship (1984, 257) ... In the final analysis, a substantial number of Sioux men concluded that the white man had abandoned, seemingly forever, the obligations and promises of assistance that formed the basis for the Dakota communal existence and all relations with people. Revenge through war, even though a futile gesture, was the only response to such a betrayal (260) ... In most cases, those saved from the tomahawk had demonstrated friendship with certain Sioux people and attained some degree of fictive kinship ties (264).

The breakdown in relations between Europeans and Dakotas came as a result of two very different world views. The Dakota who went to war went out of their traditional (indeed, *wakȟ* or sacred) obligation to their kin. Such blatant kinship violations committed by the Euro-Americans and disregard for fundamental Dakota principles of decency and humanity could not be tolerated. From the Dakota perspective, the Euro-Americans and American government

representatives revealed by their actions that they were less than human—they were *waohola ũni* (without respect). Retaliation for kinship transgressions, in the context of Dakota world view, was the logical response. The precedent was set in the cosmogony and maintained throughout time in relations with the spirit world, the natural world, and the human world. The following section will expand upon the relational perspective as a fundamental religious principle.

Relationship: A Fundamental Religious Principle

Ella Deloria clearly articulates the ultimate importance of relationship in its human, social manifestation in the kinship system, in the *tiyoŕpaye*. Gary Clayton Anderson analyzed the socio-economic manifestation of relationship by outlining how “economic partners” are fitted into the kinship system. The position articulated in this article is that relationship, manifested in the kinship system and economic relations, is grounded in a larger cosmological framework, a fundamental religious orientation that is encapsulated by the phrase/prayer/concept, *Mitákuye owás’i*. While adhering to the relational perspective one is living in harmony with the cosmic order, failing to live by the principles of respect and reciprocity is tantamount to a violation of cosmic order. On the concept of *ohokicilapi*, “mutual respect,” and its cosmic significance, Symms explains:⁴

This concept, *ohokicilapi*, refers to an innate power in the universe by which all things are bound together. Respect is the intrinsic power which causes atoms and planets to move in a circle around the source of light—as devotees perambulate a sacred place or person. The orderly procession of the stars and the constancy of the seasons are expressions of fidelity, a faithfulness which is founded on respect, on mutual respect, *ohokicilapi*.

When using correct forms of address and having a proper mental attitude toward the relative being addressed, the individual is living in accord with the cosmic order. As the Symms material so eloquently illustrates:

When the child says “grandfather” and the grandfather replies “grandson,” it is as if two strings on a musical instrument are plucked. The resonance of respect issues as an overtone. If the conduct which ensues between grandfather and grandson is true to the resonance within those two relational names, then one of the attributes of *Tob Tob Kin* is literally incorporated by the *Tiospaye* as a power flowing on the current of respect.

Incorporating attributes of the *Tob Tob Kĩ* (the four times four, the sixteen attributes of *Wakȁ Taȁȁ*, the “Great Mystery”) is the task of the *tiyoŕpaye*. According to the Symms material: “During the first three months of each year beginning at Spring Equinox, there is a vertical downpouring of the 16 powers to the people and into all creation. Then for the rest of the year there is a horizontal circulation of this infused power within the precise energy patterns of the *Tiyoŕpaye*.” The spring equinox is, typically, the time of the sun dance, a world-renewal ceremony, and the beginning of the new year. By embodying the 16 attributes in the *tiyoŕpaye*, the *tiyoŕpaye* becomes sanctified; to borrow Eliade’s words, it “participates in reality,” and is “saturated with being” (1959, 12–13).

The sixteen powers are the sixteen attributes of Wakaŋ Taŋka, the Great Mystery, the totality, the sixteen, while separate, are also one. The 16 are called the Tob Tob Kĭ, the four times four, they are introduced in the cosmogony as gendered and non-gendered beings (the four intimate powers are non-gendered). The four groups with four powers in each group, from the Symms material, are as follows:

Wakan Ankantu (superior powers)

1. The Sun—Anpetu Wikan
2. The Sky—Mahpiyatokan (Skan)
3. The Earth—Makakan
4. The Rock—Inyankan

Wakan Kolaya (associate powers)

1. The Moon—Hanwikan
2. The Wind—Tatekan
3. The Beauty—Wohpekan
4. The Winged Thunder—Wakinyan
Tanka

Wakan Kuya (subordinate powers)

1. The Buffalo—Tatankakan
2. The Bear—Hunupakan
3. The Four Winds—Tateyotopakan
4. The Whirlwind—Yumkan

Wakanlapi (intimate powers)

1. The Soul—Nagikan
2. Breath of Life—Niyakan
3. Little Soul-like—Nagilakan
4. Intelligence—Sicunkan (ton)

The central importance of relationship is expressed by the Tob Tob Kĭ in the Lakota cosmogony. In describing the creation story in the Walker material, Jahner writes:

Walker begins the mythic action by dramatizing the belief that **spiritual power functions through a network of relationships**, *Inyan*, or Rock, is the personified image of primal power. He longs to exercise his power but cannot do so, for there is “no other that he might exercise his power upon.” So he initiates the creation process and reveals the first dimension of his essential nature. As blood flows from Inyan, Sky (*Skan*) and Earth (*Maka*) are created. Earth represents materiality and Sky spirituality, qualities that are then identified with femininity and masculinity, respectively; each needs the other and both recognize the role of reciprocity in social life. With the beginning of relationship comes the need for knowledge, or light. Earth can then see what she lacks and she begins to demand further creation. (1983, 194; emphasis added)

Through *Maka*’s (Earth) complaining to *Ŝka* (Sky), *Wi* (Sun) is created; these three along with *Inya* (Rock) become known as the *Wakaŋ Ankatu* (superior powers). Associate powers (*Wakaŋ Kolaya*) are created as companions to the superior powers. Some (*Tateyotopakaŋ* and *Yumkaŋ*) of the subordinate powers (*Wakaŋ Kuya*) result from the union of *Tate* (Wind) and *Ite* (the daughter of *Wazi* and *Wakaŋka*, who are the leaders of the *Pte Oyáte*—Buffalo People—the ancestors of humankind). The other two subordinate powers are *Tataŋkakaŋ* (Buffalo) and *Hunupakan* (Bear). The four intimate powers (*Wakaŋlapi*) relates to the concept of “multiple-souls,” four souls imparted to humans. Of special significance to the topic of this paper, is one of the four intimate powers, *niyakaŋ*. In the Lakota concept of multiple-souls, the *niya* is the breath of life. The “*ni*” part of the word is found in the words *wiĉoni* (way of life), *wiĉozani* (health), *zaniye* (well-being), and *inipi* (sweat lodge or life-refreshing

lodge). Reference to this spirit or soul permeates sun dance and sweat lodge song, whether one is praying for one's own life or the life of the people.

Lakota mythology is characterized by the interactions (relationships) of the Tob Tob K̄i and other created beings, including the ancestors of humans and humans. An excerpt from Lakota mythology,⁵ Tatāka's vision, provides a good demonstration of mit̄akuyowás in action. Briefly, in this story seven families of the Pte Oyate had been tricked by Iktomi (Spider), with the help of Anog Ite (Two-faced woman, so named because one side of her face is beautiful and the other is horrible), into coming to the surface of the earth from the underground world in which they lived. Iktomi exploited Anog Ite's longing to see her people again. She was from the Pte Oyate (Ite, the daughter of the leaders of the Pte people Wazi and Wak̄āka), but was exiled to the surface of the earth and transformed into Anog Ite as punishment for her actions earlier in the story. Her selfishness (longing to see her people again) prevents her from realizing the possible suffering and hardship that they might experience through her and Iktomi's deception. The seven families of the Pte Oyate were tricked into believing that the surface of the world was a paradise with unlimited food, shelter, comfort, safety, and eternal youth. When they emerged from their underground home they landed right in the middle of a prairie snowstorm. Anog Ite appeared to them, but unlike when she first showed herself, they saw her horrible, frightening side. They realized that they had been deceived by Iktomi, who was laughing uproariously.

Some time had passed when the medicine man of the Pte Oyate, Tatāka, performed a ceremony to see how his relatives were doing on the surface of the earth. In his vision, he saw that his people no longer looked like the Pte people and they no longer spoke the Pte language; they had been transformed into humans and spoke a human language (Lakota). He also saw that they were tired, hungry, cold, and frightened. In his vision, he was shown that he and the rest of the Pte Oyate should follow their relatives to the surface of the earth to take care of and provide for their relatives. He saw that they too would be transformed. They would become "shaggy beasts" (Buffalo). True to his vision, he led the Pte Oyate to the surface of the earth and they provided for the needs of their relatives, the Lakota Oyate. This action exemplifies cultural values such as generosity, fortitude, respect, courage, love, humility, and self-sacrifice. The Lakota people reciprocate by honouring the buffalo in ceremonies, songs, and other religious behaviours. This narrative reveals the responsibility one has to one's kin and the self-sacrifice that fulfilling this responsibility may entail. I am reminded of this story every time we sing a certain buffalo song in the (inipi) sweat lodge. The "Buffalo Song" is as follows:

Tatāka Oyáte wana upi do

Tatāka Oyáte wana upi do

Wīčozani yuha upi do

(verse is sung four times)

Tatāka Oyáte wana hipi do

Tataḡa Oyáte wana hipi do

Wičozani yuha hipi do

(verse is sung three times)

I was taught this song by Dakota elder Calvin Pompana through singing it in the inipi over the past ten years. Roughly translated, the song says: “The Buffalo Nation are coming, the Buffalo Nation are coming. They are bringing health, happiness, and good feelings.” This verse is sung four times. The next verse says: “The Buffalo Nation are here now. The Buffalo Nation are here now. They have brought health, happiness, and good feelings.” This verse is sung three times, totalling seven in honour of the seven original families of the Pte Oyate, who came to the surface of earth to form the Očeti Šakowj (Seven Council Fires), the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota Nation.

***Wačekiya*: “To Address a Relative,” “To Pray”**

Deloria notes that the “need of first establishing proper relationship prevailed even when one came to pray. It gave a man status with the Supernatural as well as with man” (1944, 28). In fact, as Deloria points out, the same word, *Wačekiya*, is used “to address a relative” and “to pray.” When one prays, one is addressing a relative. When the Tree-dweller dreamer (*čáotidá ihąmdapi*) calls in his or her spirit helpers, as the Yuwipi *Wičašta* does in the Yuwipi ceremony, to ask information from the Little People (*čáotidá*—“little tree-dweller”), or invokes their presence to cure, the Tree-dweller dreamer is praying and addressing a relative. The dreamer is someone who has established a relationship with the Little People through dreams. As is consistent with proper relationship behaviour, gifts are exchanged (reciprocity). Food and tobacco are set out for the Little People, Little People songs are sung to honour the Little People, and the dreamers are given the power to heal by curing psycho-spiritual and physical illnesses, to see into the future, to find lost articles, and to achieve success in hunting. Both are living according to correct relationship behaviour through mutual respect, *ohokičilapi*, and reciprocity. If the dreamer or anyone is disrespectful towards the Little People, they face the risk of some sort of punishment or negative repercussion. They may bring bad luck upon themselves. The same is true of any relationship with the supernaturals, the spirits, the *takų-waka*. A person is guided by behaviours and attitudes fundamental to what it means to be religious, to be human. The written sources reveal the malevolent nature of the Little People (Ruml, forthcoming). According to the written and oral sources, the Little People can be quite dangerous, but only to those who are disrespectful. The *čáotidá* may cause a hunter to get lost, lose his or her sanity, and die, but they can also, to borrow the words of James Howard, “confer great power for good if approached in the correct manner” (1984, 101).

Relationship: Expressed in the Cumulative Tradition

By “cumulative tradition” I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe. (Smith 1964, 141)

It is often said that in First Nation languages no word exists to translate the word “religion.” What this actually means is that no word exists to refer to what has, in the West, been called “religion”; a defined, reified system of institutionalized beliefs and doctrines separate from everyday life. Instead, First Nation’s people speak of “the way,” a way of life, a way of being that encompasses all aspects of a person’s life. From the indigenous perspective, prayer and worship are not things reserved for Sunday, they permeate all aspects of life, are lived day to day. This understanding speaks directly to what Wilfred Cantwell Smith calls for in his understanding or definition of religion. For Smith, “nothing in heaven or on earth” answers to the name of “religion” as it has come to be defined in the West (Smith 1981, 4). Like First Nations understandings of “the way,” Smith defines religion as a way of life which is lived day to day. The Dakota refer to this as Dakota *wičoni* (in Lakota, according to Arthur Amiotte, it is called *Lakolya* or *Lakol Wičohaŋ*): “practicing the cultural ideals as a matter of habit or automatic response with full commitment with the knowledge that by doing so one is moving, doing, and being in both a human and sacred manner as prescribed by Lakota tradition” (Amiotte 1985). Regarding the concept of “tradition,” Raymond Bucko notes:

I asked an elderly Lakota speaker how to say “traditional” in Lakota, and she was thoroughly puzzled. She said, “We never talked about that in the past,” and then volunteered that you could say *Lakhota ȩ* “do things Indian way” or *lila Lakhota* “very Indian.” (Bucko, 100)⁶

However one defines “tradition,” if an individual is able to grasp the profundity of *mitákuyowás* and actualize the principles of respect and reciprocity inherent in such an orientation, then an individual is living the Dakota *wičoni*, the Dakota way of life and will have *wičozani wašte*, the good life, health, happiness, and prosperity. In this article, we have already seen how living this way of life is expressed in some aspects of the cumulative tradition; in the *tiyošpaye*, in economic and political relations, in the cosmogony, in the *wičašta/wjya wakaŋ*’s relationship with their spirit helpers. The following sections continue to elaborate the expressions of relationship in the cumulative tradition.

The Pipe and Tobacco

When a Lakota does anything in a formal manner he should first smoke the pipe. This is because the spirit in the pipe smoke is pleasing to *Wakha tha ka* and to all spirits. In any ceremony this should be the first thing that is done (George Sword, quoted in Walker 1980, 75).

The primary ceremonial act of establishing a relationship is to smoke the pipe. A special bond is created amongst those who smoke together. According to Dakota elders, smoking the pipe is equivalent to saying *Mitákuye owásj*. When the pipe is lit, it is offered to the four directions, the powers above, and the powers below. All orders of creation are represented in the pipe's construction and, according to Dakota teachings, when the human being smokes it he/she is binding his/herself to the totality, to *Waką Tąką*. As Sword points out in the above quote, smoking the pipe should be the first thing that is done in any ceremony. It is an act of affirming that "you are related to all." It is also a form of respect towards *Waką Tąką* and the spirits because, as Sword points out, "the spirit in the pipe smoke is pleasing to *Waką Tąką* and to all spirits." Tobacco itself can be considered the primary offering or gift to the spirits. Tobacco is given, out of respect, to traditional healers when they are consulted or when they are asked to conduct a sweat lodge. Tobacco is offered to the rocks and the willows when they are taken to be used in a sweat lodge. Tobacco is placed in the centre pit where the rocks will be placed, and in the holes that are dug around the centre where the willows will be placed. A tobacco rosary, along with a filled pipe, is taken with the vision quester to the vision quest site. Tobacco is left for the Thunder-beings at the approach of a thunderstorm. Tobacco is left at *waką* places such as a waterfall or a special, natural formation. In the traditional way, tobacco is offered to the spirit of the animal that is killed. On all of these occasions, tobacco is offered out of respect. It is a reciprocal act of gift giving, as thanks for answered prayers, or to petition for blessings, or out of admiration and respect. Offering tobacco also exemplifies other important cultural values, such as generosity and humbleness.

Feasting

The distribution of food is a means of connectedness between sacred principles and what we are as human beings. It is a reciprocal kind of activity in which we are reminded of sacred principles. Indeed the very ceremonies which have come down to us all include the distribution of food either before or after or during the rite itself. (Amiotte 1990, 39)

Tobacco is not the only offering given to the Creator and the natural powers of the universe; food is also offered. Feasting, the sharing of food, accompanies all ceremonies or gatherings. Before humans partake of the feast, a "spirit dish" is made. Making a spirit dish involves smudging⁷ all of the food and taking a tiny portion of everything that will be consumed at the feast. The food is prayed over, tobacco is placed with the spirit dish and the food is offered to the Creator and the natural powers of the universe. It is believed that the spirits consume the food on the spiritual level and the humans consume the food on the human level. Memorial feasts are held, during which families and friends share a meal with the spirits of their dead ancestors. In fact, as Amiotte stresses, the sharing of food is part of all ceremonies. The giving of food, the sharing of food is a reciprocal act, a sacred act fundamental to being religious, to living in correct relationship. People continue to take care of their kinship responsibilities by feeding their relatives, living and dead.

The Giveaway

Another sacred, reciprocal activity is what has been called “the giveaway.” At the giveaway, goods are distributed to friends, relatives, community members, and others in attendance. I have been to many giveaways, mainly at powwows and sun dances. At powwows, the giveaways were often held by a particular family, in memory of a deceased family member. Specific goods were given to people who were particularly close to the deceased or who supported the family in their time of grief. After the particular people are acknowledged and given a gift, the other people present are invited to come forward, pick out something, and shake the hands of the family whose relative died. Accepting the gift is also a sacred act done out of respect for the family and their loved one. Memorial giveaways are not the only occasion for a giveaway. As Amiotte writes, “There are numerous occasions connected with the giveaway. The feast and the giveaway actually accompany all major ceremonies. They are an integral part of them. They become like one of the offerings that is made to the gods and to the people on all these occasions” (1990, 41).

Dancing and Singing

I saw so many of their different varieties of dances amongst the Sioux that I should almost be disposed to denominate them the “dancing Indians!” It would actually seem as if they had dances for everything. (Catlin 1926, 244)

George Catlin recognized the importance of dancing and singing to the Dakota. Along with feasts and giveaways, dances and songs are means of honouring, of showing respect, of reciprocating, of giving, and of communicating and inculcating cultural values. Regarding dancing, Catlin correctly observed that, “it enters into their forms of worship, and is often their mode of appealing to the Great Spirit—of paying their usual devotions to their medicine—and of honouring and entertaining strangers of distinction in their country” (244). Dancing and singing are sacred acts, forms of prayer and devotion. Wilson Wallis outlined many of the different dances held by the Canadian Dakota (1947). All of the dances were held as a result of a dream instruction. Dreams are of utmost importance to the Dakota. It is through dreams that individuals establish relationships with the spirits. Individuals who share similar dreams form societies and these societies hold public performances dramatizing their dream experiences. One of the major societies mentioned in the historical literature is the *Wakȋ Wačipi* Society (the Dakota version of the Ojibwe *midewiwin*). Dancing, singing, and feasting are all part of the *Wakȋ Wačipi*; held in honour of *Ūktehi*, “the god of the waters,” the patron of the society.

Wallis provides numerous accounts of individuals who were instructed in a dream by the Thunderers, Buffalo, or some other *wakȋ* being, to hold a certain dance in their honour. If the individual neglected to do so, serious negative repercussions resulted. An individual who neglected their dreams might be: struck by lightning (1947, 52); made sick or be killed (1947, 58); be gored by a buffalo

(1947, 60); or have some other misfortune befall them. If the individual fulfilled their dream instructions, then blessings followed; more often than not the individual would become a medicine man and would be able to heal others, find the buffalo, or perform other shamanic functions.

The Sun Dance: Wiwəyang Wačipi (“Looking towards the direction of the sun, they dance”)

Often a person pledges to dance at the sun dance ceremony as a result of a dream inspired instruction. The sun dance is one of the most important ceremonies for Dakota people; it is held partly, as Arthur Amiotte notes, to honour the sun as one of the most *wakə* hierophanies (1985), partly to acknowledge or re-establish the interrelatedness of all things, and partly to request blessings from the Creator and the natural powers of the universe. It is often said that the ultimate reason for holding a sun dance is “so that others may live,” “so that the world will continue.” People are asking for *wičozani wašte*—good life, health, and happiness. The sun dance is the place where, according to the oral teachings, one of the greatest forms of giving takes place—self-sacrifice, giving of oneself so that others may live; the ultimate expression of *mitákuyowás*. Exemplifying such cultural values as sharing, caring, love, generosity, bravery, commitment, and sincerity, the dancers give up food and water for four days. The men fulfill pledges that they have made to have their chests pierced; two cuts are made in the chest with a scalpel, and pegs made from the chokecherry tree are inserted through the incisions. A rope that is tied to the centre pole is attached to the pegs and the dancer pulls back from the pole until the pegs rip through the flesh. In a similar way, buffalo skulls may be attached to the back of a male dancer; he drags the skulls around the dance area until they rip through the flesh. The singers sing the piercing song when the piercing takes place. The words to the first two lines of this “piercing song” are as follows:

Wakə təkə ʊšimaya ye

Wanikte cha dechəmu

Wakan Tanka pity me.

I am doing this so that I will have life.

The women do not pierce their chests or pull buffalo skulls, but they do give up food and water and may, as a result of a dream instruction, have an eagle feather sewn into their arm, which is then pulled away, tearing their flesh. Both men and women may also choose to make flesh offerings whereby tiny pieces of flesh are cut away from their arms, wrapped in red cloth, and placed at the base of the sacred tree in the centre of the sun dance arbour.

The men who officiate at the Dakota Eagle sun dance are members of the Red Blanket Society. The Red Blanket men have sacrificed for many years at the sun dance. Away from the sun dance, they have exemplified *mitákuyowás* cultural values, such as those mentioned above. They have taken care of the elderly and responded to the requests and needs of the community, especially those of their sun

dance brothers and sisters. In recognition of their exemplary living and commitment to the values and principles inherent in the sun dance and their knowledge of the proper protocols for running the ceremonies, they are initiated into the Red Blanket Society.

The Waka Wačipi, the sun dance and other dances, feasts, and giveaways all exemplify the relational perspective. Humans, the waka beings, the animals, and Waka taqa are acknowledged and respected through feasting, praying, singing, dancing, and gift giving.

Conclusions: The Revitalization of Aboriginal Spirituality and Individual and Community Well-Being

In conclusion, the Dakota have a rich religious heritage expressing an understanding of the cosmos and our place in it. The phrase Mitakuye Owásĭ encapsulates what it means to be religious, to be human. It reflects a fundamental cosmological orientation that forms the basis of how human beings, ideally, should think, act, and relate to one another, to the natural world, and, ultimately, to the cosmos. All aspects of religious life reflect mitakuyowás; sacred narratives, traditional teachings, and ceremonies are directed towards actualizing the principles inherent in mitakuyowás. The basic social unit in Dakota society—the tiyošpaye—is grounded in this orientation and economic relations are guided by it. It is a sacred way of life, an ideal that should be lived day to day and is noticeably evident in religious ceremonies. While living mitakuyowás, one is living in harmony with the cosmic order; failing to live by the underlying values of respect and reciprocity is tantamount to a violation of cosmic order, creating an imbalance resulting in physical, spiritual, mental, and/or emotional sickness and even death. The path to well-being involves restoring balance at the individual, familial, communal, and cosmic level. The ceremonies, sacred narratives, and teachings are all designed to maintain or restore balance. If an individual is able to grasp the profundity of mitakuyowás and actualize the principles of respect and reciprocity and other cultural values inherent in such an orientation, then an individual is living the Dakota wičoni or wičoha (the Dakota way of life), and will have wičozani wašte, zaniye; a good life, health, happiness, well-being. The Anishinaabe, Cree, and no doubt every other First Nation in Canada have similar concepts to the Dakota concept of mitakuyowás; expressing cultural values, correct relational behaviour, and guidelines for community and individual well-being. For example, the Anishinaabe concept of mino bimaadiziwin, “good life,” is equivalent to the Dakota wičozani wašte. All the teachings and ceremonies are designed to help the individual reach mino bimaadiziwin. One way of having mino bimaadiziwin is through living gagige inakonige (eternal natural law). The seven sacred laws/teachings—wisdom, love, respect, kindness, humbleness, courage, and truth—are part of gagige inakonige, with respect being the underlying cultural value. As Anishinaabe elder and traditional teaching

Gigwegigaabo (Richard Morrison) says: “Mangade osiseon [respect] is respect at its greatest when we live it. When we live it, and I stress this very, very strongly, is to know all of these seven teachings is to be all the seven teaching all at once in balance with ourselves” (Morrison 2004).

Policy-makers need to understand these basic world-view concepts in order to develop effective, culturally relevant, and culturally appropriate policies in a way that is respectful of Aboriginal people and the cultural values guiding correct relationship. Policy-makers concerned with Aboriginal well-being can especially benefit from understanding the basic natural laws that are central to the world views of the indigenous people of Canada. In order to gain such an understanding, however, more collaborative research with elders and traditional teachers is needed; the bulk of the traditional teachings remain unpublished, but are very much alive in the hearts and minds of the knowledge carriers.

An interesting aspect of the revitalization of Aboriginal spirituality is the fact that one might find, for example, Ojibway, Cree, Métis, Blackfoot, Dene, Shuswap, Mohawk, Salish, and non-Aboriginal people all dancing at a Dakota sun dance. Such was the case at the Dakota Eagle sun dance held at Birds Hill Provincial Park. The *Wiyayang Waçipi Itaçá* (sun dance chief) Calvin Pompana explained that the Eagle sun dance is not a “Dakota” sun dance, it is for all people. He often told the story of the White Buffalo Calf Spirit Woman who brought the sun dance and the other seven sacred rites, along with the pipe, to the people. When she came to the people, she appeared in the four symbolic colours of humans in the world (black, red, yellow, white). Pompana says that because White Buffalo Calf Spirit Woman came in the four symbolic colours of humans in the world, the teachings and ceremonies are for all people. This interpretation of the meaning of the story provides an appropriate ethic for the emerging global community. It also stands in stark contrast to the exclusivist perspectives communicated in the Protection of Ceremonies Statement issued by Arvol Looking Horse, “the 19th Generation Keeper of the Original Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe,”⁸ or the rules for admittance into the Three Fires Society Midewiwin. Both of these perspectives limit or exclude the participation of non-Aboriginal people in the ceremonies. While the reasons for both the Protection of Ceremonies Statement and the exclusivist teachings of the Three Fires Midewiwin are understandable, it is ironic that ceremonies and teachings directed towards improving well-being can cause so much pain and suffering among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The strengthening of community among sun dancers and sweat lodge “brothers” and “sisters” is powerful; there is a sense of solidarity and one is comforted by the fact that one can always count on support when support is needed. The elders tell the sun dancers to take that good feeling that they experience at the sun dance or sweat lodge and carry it with them into their everyday life. The elders say that as the stresses and pressures of day-to-day life begin to creep back into the dancers’ life, the dancers’ health and well-being is going to be affected, and that for strength they can draw upon the experience that they had at ceremony. In

this regard, there is a song that elder Calvin Pompana encourages people to sing whenever they are feeling downhearted. It goes like this:

Heĉeya iŝnana niyazj do
Dakota wiĉoyeg yuha niyazj
Yuha niyazj ye do
Hey yey yey yo
Dakota akiĉita ob niyazj ye do
Hey yey yey yey yo
(verse is sung four times)

Roughly translated, this song says, “You who are standing there alone, feeling sad, lonely, hurt, unloved. You are not alone. You are standing there with the ceremonies and teachings of your people (Dakota wiĉoyeg). Moreover, the akiĉita (your ancestors, going back to the beginning of time, who have made sacrifices and suffered so that you could be here) are standing with you.” The song reminds the singer and those hearing the song to take comfort in this awareness and realize that they are not alone, they are never alone. They are part of the circle of life and their relatives and the ceremonies and teachings are always with them, watching over them, taking care of them, providing strength and comfort when needed; helping them to reach or maintain a state of wiĉozani waŝte.

Hau mitákuyowás.

Endnotes

- 1 I have maintained the original iteration when quoting sources; otherwise, Dakota words are spelled utilizing the following phonetic symbols: *ĉ* is pronounced ch; *ŝ* is pronounced sh; *ǩ* is a nasalized a; *ǰ* is a nasalized i; and *ǫ* is a nasalized u. I have not consistently indicated stress, aspiration, or glottal stops.
- 2 For an elaboration, see Landes, *Mystic Lake*, pp. 95–160.
- 3 For an examination of these sources, see Ruml 1997.
- 4 In *Lakota Myth*, Elaine Jahner notes that mimeographed copies of material from the James Walker collection were prepared by staff members at the Oglala Sioux Culture Center of the Red Cloud Indian School for use as curriculum materials to teach Lakota literature and mythology (Walker 1983, x). Jahner notes that the wide circulation of these materials among various colleges and universities has “had a profound influence on the way people view Lakota literature, and many of Walker’s stories have become part of contemporary Lakota oral tradition” (xi). This mimeographed material supplies an extremely insightful articulation of Lakota religious thought. Throughout this article, this material will be referred to as the Symms material, from its editor T. E. Symms.
- 5 Paraphrased from Walker 1983, Dooling 1988, and Symms, n.d.
- 6 A Cree student of mine, after taking my Introduction to Aboriginal Spirituality course, remarked, “I didn’t know that I was traditional until I took your course.” He made the point that they did not define what they do as “tradition”; they were just living their lives. I have discussed this point with other “traditional” people who, being opposed to systematization and labelling, also had difficulty with the word “tradition.” See Bucko, 98, for a discussion of the concept of tradition, including the question of tradition and the reinvention of culture, whereby he references the works of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1986), Handler and Linnekin (1984), and Shils (1981).
- 7 A smudge consists of burning sweetgrass or some other natural herb/medicine in order to purify the items.
- 8 See <www.dlncoalition.org/dln_issues/protection_of_ceremonies.htm>.

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