



Chapter 1

Spirits and the South Dakota Land

An introductory essay by Vine Deloria, Jr.

The plains of the Dakotas are both hospitable and hostile to people. You must welcome their bounty but ensure that they do not sweep you up, taking your life, and making you a part of their restless spirit. The Sioux Indian people knew that they must be ever vigilant to the changes in weather, and they learned to read the clouds and winds and follow the trails used by other creatures when they moved camp or sought the buffalo herds when hunting. Thus their spirituality came from continuous occupation of the land and establishing relationships with the various creatures the land was supporting. Ultimately, this adjustment required that the people become reconciled to the other creatures that lived in the region. The land presented the place to live, and the animals helped to define the manner of living.

Religion, like other aspects of our human life, is a set of beliefs and practices developed over thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of years. The religious experiences and expressions of any particular group of people vary in accordance with their situation and the immediate historical memories that are recalled as precedents to solve contemporary problems. So it is with the Dakota/Lakota people of our state. In order to understand the modern expressions of spirituality, we must look back as far as tribal memories can be extended to discover how the people arrived here and what this land meant to them.

The very earliest stories of the people must take place near the Gulf of Mexico and even, perhaps, in Central America. According to Black Elk, as recorded in *When the Tree Flowered*, there was a time when the people did not have fire, lacked relatives, and lived in amorphous social groupings without laws and customs save those that prevented continuous social discord. From the description of their condition, it seems likely that they were survivors of a major climatic catastrophe that had destroyed their previous social organizations and religious beliefs. During this stay in the far south they discovered fire, and one of their medicine men had a dream about a location he designated as the mysterious island hill. This site became the focus and destination of later migrations as the people moved out of the coastal plain in search of a land meant for them alone.

The migrations must have taken thousands of years because we have reference to a time when they appear to have lived in Central America in a land of many volcanoes. In later years when the Dakota/Lakota occupied the Dakotas, the people would camp along the White River, where there were columns of white smoke rising into the air from underground burning lignite. It was along this river that elders taught the people that the columns of smoke meant that a massive fire existed somewhere in the earth. By pointing out the many smokes, they were able to explain a land in the south where they had once lived. Actually, as late as the 1860s, there were columns of smoke rising in the Black Hills and along the Little Missouri in Montana, but the people, by then confined to reservations, were unable to pass along these stories because they were denied the chance to visit these locations.

There is also a story of primeval times in the traditions remembered by James Walker's group of elders, when the Seven Council Fires lived in the far north as small hunting bands that covered a large area and spoke the same language. Eventually, the seven largest bands became loosely confederated as the Seven Fires, or allies, for protection against more numerous and hostile neighbors. One day a powerful spirit appeared to them and warned of an impending climatic catastrophe. He urged them to go south until they found a land where the leaves of the trees were different. The northern sojourn may have happened during a time when large men and animals inhabited the continent because a related story, found also in the Cheyenne traditions, suggested that a major change occurred during which animals and people were downsized to their present stature. This disaster created the conditions whereby, to establish primacy in the new world, the two-leggeds and four-leggeds held their legendary race around the Black Hills. Since they appeared to have fire in this story, it must be later than the sojourn at the Gulf of Mexico.

We do know that the Dakota/Lakota traveled over most of the North American continent in search of the mysterious island hill because we find small groups with languages closely related to the Dakota language scattered up and down the Atlantic seaboard that are thought to have broken away from the main body as it wandered northwards from the Gulf of Mexico. The Dakota migrants seem to have gotten as far north as Pennsylvania before they turned westward into the Great Lakes area. Pressures from the Indians east and north of them forced these Great Lakes inhabitants to continue moving westward. Perhaps at this time the people divided into the historic tribes that we know today, such as the Winnebagos, Osages, Omahas, Poncas, and Iowas. At some point, however, at least one legend of the Dakota people relates that they lived on the shores of the "Western Sea" where they received the Sacred Pipe. Could they have meant the Pacific Ocean? Perhaps Lake Bonneville in Utah or Lake Lahonton in Nevada would have been impressive enough to convince them that these were vast inland seas. Unfortunately, so much of the oral tradition has been lost that we can only sketch out the possible migratory routes and offer a tentative "before-and-after" chronology that, although it is almost whimsical, gives us some sense of their historical journeys.

During the course of their migrations, the Dakota/Lakotas developed a ceremonial religious life that provided a relationship with the higher spiritual powers. We cannot guess the order in which these rituals developed, but a listing of them will prove useful in understanding the Indian people we meet in American history. In *The Sacred Pipe*, Joseph Epes Brown identified seven rites of the Oglala Sioux and compared them with Roman Catholic doctrines, hoping, one suspects, to validate them as religious practices. His identifications, however, make many Indians uncomfortable, particularly when he suggests that the White Buffalo Calf Woman is an Indian counterpart of the Virgin Mary, thereby affirming the reality of the Virgin and preempting the Dakota experience altogether. His list of rituals included the following:

- 1) *Waki Cagapi*—the keeping of the soul
- 2) *Inipi*—the rite of purification
- 3) *Hanblecheyapi*—crying for a vision
- 4) *Wiwanyag Wachipi*—the sun dance
- 5) *Hunkapi*—the making of relatives
- 6) *Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lowan*—preparing a girl for womanhood
- 7) *Tapa Wanka Yap*—the throwing of the ball

So popular has Brown's identification been that several generations of Indians have come to believe that the number *seven* has a special status in Dakota/Lakota heritage as

three, seven, and twelve do in the Christian tradition. But Brown's list is neither exhaustive nor definitive of the actual number of rituals performed by the Indian spiritual leaders. He appears to have talked only with Black Elk, who would probably know only the stories passed down in his *tiospaye*, (also spelled *tiyospaye*) or family network.

Ella Deloria, a Yankton linguist working with Franz Boas of Columbia University, was asked to verify the accuracy of reports sent to the American Museum of Natural History by James Walker at the turn of the century. She went to many old people on the Pine Ridge reservation in the late 1930s, including, wherever possible, some of Walker's original informants or their children. She discovered that there were originally three basic rituals: the Sun Dance, Making of Relatives, and Preparation of Girls for womanhood, called the Buffalo Dance because womanhood and the earth were represented by the buffalo. These rites seemed to be universal among the Teton Lakota.

Closely related to these three were five more rituals, making eight major ceremonies and thus precluding Brown's later symmetry:

- 1) sun-gazing
- 2) making relatives
- 3) the buffalo ceremony (girl's puberty)
- 4) keeping the ghost
- 5) the virgin's fire
- 6) anti-natural feast (*Heyoka-wozepi*)
- 7) double-woman
- 8) the peace-pipe

She also found that the different bands of the Dakotas had ceremonies specific to their people. The Oglala, for example, also conducted these ceremonies:

- 9) killing the first fox
- 10) ritual before butchering
- 11) sitting down Omaha-style
- 12) throwing the challenge sticks
- 13) warrior training for young boys
- 14) fasting routine
- 15) sweat lodge routine
- 16) killing a spider

Most of these rituals were so old that only the elders could remember them and describe how they were conducted; they did not know why or when the rites would have been used.

There were probably more ceremonies practiced by the Dakota/Lakota peoples hundreds or thousands of years ago that eventually became victims of the passage of time and changing conditions. Thus the practices of today, which stress the sun dance, the Yuwipi, or ceremony of the stone dreamers, and the sweat lodge, and neglect the other rites identified by Brown and Deloria, would certainly be regarded by future observers as fundamental to the exercise of the tribal religion. Even Brown admitted that no one knew what "throwing the ball" was supposed to represent. We can suggest, therefore, that as the Dakota/Lakota people completed their migrations and moved into the Dakota region, they brought with them a set of ceremonies that had served them well in previous places.

A major task in adjusting to the prairie lands of the Dakotas required close observation of the unusual features of the landscape. People noticed the gathering of birds at Spirit Mound near Vermillion, visited later by Lewis and Clark, and, knowing that the



The Black Hills of western South Dakota, called *Paha Sapa* by the Lakota, who consider them sacred, were once the home of the world's largest gold mine, Homestake, and are today a national tourist destination. *Center for Western Studies.*

spirits often took the physical form of birds to perform their tasks as messengers of the higher powers, set aside the Mound as a special place. They already knew about the Pipestone Quarry, having visited there since time before memory seeking stone for their pipes. There was a special ritual performed before entering the Quarry seeking permission from the spirits of the site to remove the stone for pipes. If the petition to enter was granted, a small rainstorm would occur and then the suppliants would be free to enter the site.

Moving up and down along the shores of the Missouri River, the people encountered the monster Unktehi who lived in the river with his glaring eye and sawtooth-shaped back. People avoided looking directly at him on the few occasions when he was seen, for it was noted that men and women often went insane and suffered bad luck if they saw him eye-to-eye. He seemed to be the last remaining creature from a previous world, although they could find skeletons of even larger creatures after intense rains when the stream banks gave way under the rush of waters and revealed what was buried in the earth. Even today some people claim to know the location of the last sighting of this monster. He figures in some of the complex legends of the early days and other worlds.

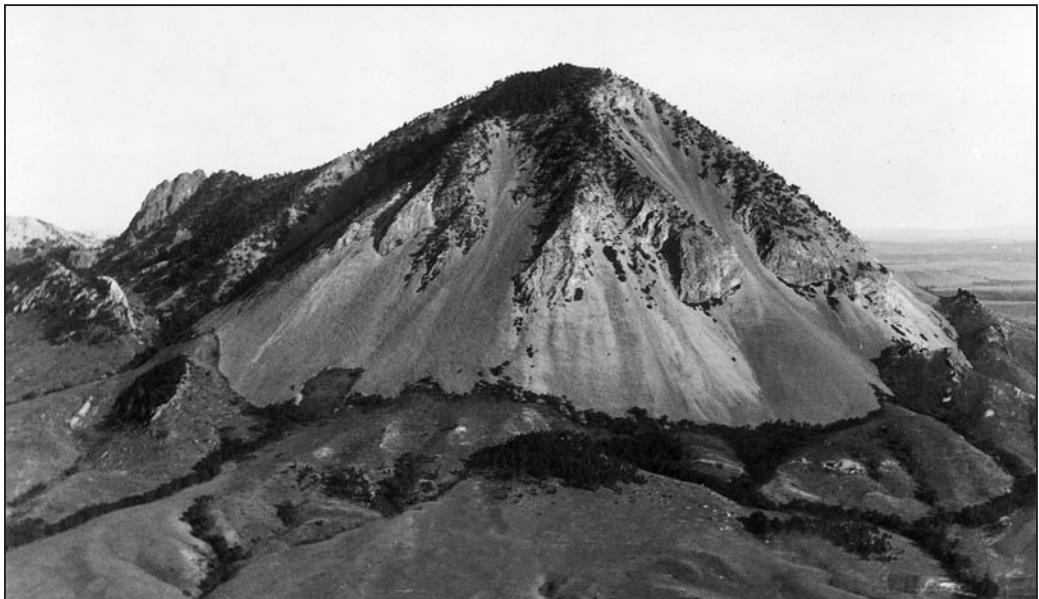
The White River surprised and pleased people. As noted, columns of smoke rose from its banks, and people remembered the long-ago times when their ancestors had fought against a people from the western mountains, probably the Salish who were on a hunting expedition into the territory of the Dakotas. In the midst of the struggle came a great earthquake, rolling the ground as if it was a rug being shaken, destroying the beautiful prairie and leaving only the burned-out stretches of riverbank. General Alfred Sully, looking at the North Dakota Badlands in the 1860s, a similar location where smokes rose, observed that it looked like hell with the fires almost burned out. Until very late in the people's experience, there were also smokes rising from mountains in the Black

Hills, and they speculated that the Hills might be part of another world. Thus the Hills were approached with true humility when the people entered to make new lodge poles.

When they did come to the Black Hills, the sacred island hill located in the center of the immense grasslands, they knew immediately that it was the site seen in a vision by Red Thunder eons ago when they lived on the Gulf of Mexico. Spiritual leaders further pointed out the great racetrack, the geological hogback formation that surrounds the Hills that had been the site of the great contest to determine the relationship of the two-leggeds and four-leggeds for this world. The race settled the question of who would be dominant in the new world in which they found themselves after the great catastrophe. Since that race, some elders have said, the Black Hills have been reserved for the birds and animals, and while the people could go there for tipi poles, vision quests, and short visits, they could not live there permanently.

Close examination of the Hills revealed many portals to other worlds, worlds that could only be reached by spiritual leaders who had been accepted by the spirits of the Hills. Thus Bear Butte, Bear's Lodge, and Inyan Kara, the heart of the world, became important locations for holding special kinds of ceremonies. It is said by the Holy Men that there is a cave in Bear Butte that can be visited during a ritual at a certain time of the year. Spirits in the cave instruct the people in many things and sometimes give prophecies about the future. An old story says that beneath the Bear's Lodge is found another world, with lakes and mountains just as in our world, but no one has known how to enter that world in many generations. Inyan Kara also has hidden places that only powerful medicine men can enter. Mountains in the Black Hills can be entered during the course of the ceremonies, suggesting that in some instances the spirit world and the world we live in are separated primarily by the way we understand the world.

During these journeys of exploration, the people found the sacred places either through vision quests or in dreams and visions thrust upon them during the course of



A point of entrance into the spiritual world for many Lakota, Bear Butte, *Mato Paha* to the Lakota, rises 1,200 feet in a cone-like projection from the plains floor northeast of the Black Hills. *Center for Western Studies.*

their daily life. Foremost in these experiences was the discovery and confrontation with the sacred stones that offered unusual powers to the spiritual leaders. On the top of certain buttes, the people found small, round stones that they said had been created by the thunders when the lightning struck the buttes during a storm. Medicine men usually had several stones to perform tasks for them. They were allowed to take a stone if it cried out to them that it would become their helper. But the stones had to be lying freely on the ground. One could not dig them out of the earth. If a stone were partially buried, that was a sign that it was not yet willing to align itself with a human. Some credence must be given to the belief that the Thunders made the stones. It seems most likely that in a few years of gathering stones the supply would be exhausted. Yet each generation of spiritual leaders found stones lying freely on the ground and ready to work with the human beings.

The stones could perform marvelous tasks. They could predict the future, heal serious and unusual illnesses, and secure the people in their villages by acting as sentinels. Some stones could also bring material things to the medicine men. Others could provide a special vision to view distant places. Frances Densmore, in *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, relates many stories of the use of these powerful stones. In one reported incident, Goose, a Lakota medicine man, took a small stone and viewed the bottom of the Missouri when looking for a rifle that had been dropped into the river. He reported that when he looked at the river through the stone, the usually muddy water became clear—enabling him to find the rifle immediately. She also records incidents in which stones were sent to bring back certain physical objects and did so, to the surprise of the people observing the event.

Another kind of stone impressed itself on the people and these were called “picture rocks.” Usually they were great granite boulders mostly sunken into the ground. Some people believed they had been brought to the plains by the ancient glaciers or gigantic floods. Early in the morning, just as the sun was rising, medicine men would consult these stones and discover that there were pictures on them predicting some event in the immediate future. People said the Night People imprinted them on the stones, although no clear definition of these people was ever given. Sometimes the pictures would appear on the face of cliffs such as the Deer Rocks in Montana or the prophetic Wall in the Black Hills. Aaron McGaffey Beede, an Episcopal missionary in North Dakota, related how these rocks one day predicted a severe thunderstorm and a lightning strike on a woman during a church service. Sadly, the pictures proved accurate and invoked great respect in him for the old ways of the spiritual elders.

If we look at the names the people gave themselves, we can easily determine the animals that were important to the people. Three animals come immediately to mind: the buffalo, the bear, and the wolf. Taken together, these three animals are found represented in the names of the people about sixty-five percent of the time. We can assume, therefore, that the spiritual relationship between the people and these animals was profound and long lasting. In character, personality, and emotional life, these animals behave in a manner very close to that of humans. They are very social, have great concern for their families, and can be fierce in defense of their own, but retain a sense of humor and penchant for recreation matched perhaps only by the beaver.

The Indian people depended upon the buffalo as the major source of their food supply both before they had horses and during the great decades of horse-mobility. People noticed that when a buffalo was injured the immediate buffalo family would gather around to help him. They were willing to sacrifice themselves during a time of danger by rallying near the wounded animal. But they also loved to wander into the sun-



Emblematic of the resiliency of life on the plains, the bison is today raised by ranchers in numbers approaching the vast herds that once roamed the Dakota plains. *Center for Western Studies.*

flower fields and toss the plants up in the air, catching them with their horns and adorning themselves with decorations. Most critical, from our perspective, was the manner in which the buffalo grazed and moved. Two elder bison would go ahead of the family group as scouts. The bulls would graze on the outside of the family group, with the cows and young calves in the center. They would rotate in case of bad weather so that everyone shared the hardships. Indians copied this mode of travel; a band, moving from one hunting place to another, would virtually duplicate the formation used by the buffalo.

The bear was an unusual animal and had a diet somewhat akin to that of the people. He could eat meat or berries and the combination seemed to suit him fine. We do not realize today how populous the bears were on the original plains landscape. Early reports tell us that great packs of white bears roamed the land, often bringing down the old bison that wandered away from the herd. James Pattie, an early explorer of the plains, recorded that in one day, while traveling some thirty miles along the Arkansas River, he counted over three hundred bears. There was thus a good chance that one would meet a bear before one met a buffalo or deer.

The bear had great medicine powers, and his knowledge of beneficial roots that could cure human ailments meant that he was highly revered by the people. The bear would appear in dreams and visions to bestow great healing powers on chosen individuals. The bear also had some prophetic powers, rarely exercised since the stones performed this function also, but greatly in demand during times of crisis. We can gauge the scope of the bear's influence on the people by simply noting the variants in people's names: Standing Bear, Conquering Bear, Black Bear, Bull Bear, and so forth. Humans displaying positive personality traits often were described in bear terms, demonstrating that the animal had a high status with the people.

The wolf had much the same profile as the bear. Large wolf packs roamed the western plains, competitors with the Indians for food. In some instances, it was a contest between wolf and human for buffalo meat, although the wolves generally took the aged and young while the Indians hunted the adult buffalo. Surprisingly, when not in direct

competition for the buffalo, wolves were often friendly with the people. There are several stories of people who lived with the wolves or who were rescued by wolves that came to them in a blizzard and slept next to them, providing the human with sufficient warmth to survive.

The wolf's power to travel quickly and almost invisibly through the wilderness was the envy of the people. Almost universally the tribes of the plains called their scouts "wolves" because they were trained to move quickly without attracting attention. The survival of every hunting band was dependent on their scouts, who were responsible for locating both food and foe. Scouts were expected to give quick and accurate information. If a scout lied about or exaggerated what he saw, he might place the whole village in danger. So scouts—wolves—set standards for accurate observation and reporting. Some scouts were as legendary as the holy men. Standing Bear said that the Brûlé scout Roan Horse could travel fast at night because he could tell what the landscape was by the feeling of the wind blowing on his bare skin.

Other Indian names describe the relationship of these creatures with some tribal members. If we wished to examine the whole biotic scheme of the plains, we would need do little more than examine the names of the people and learn the stories of how animals and birds became friends with some of the humans, giving them mysterious powers. These relationships were always oriented toward the practical ways of living in this particular geographic region. People could understand the cycles of nature and the behavior of other creatures because of a deep apprehension of the world in which they lived. Although each tribe had its own name, the most common concept they shared was that the world was not physical but ultimately composed of spirit—*woniya* in the Dakota. This spirit, a superior intelligence, created the complexities of the world's organic growth and geological change. Indeed, it pervaded and supported everything.

Through understanding the relationships of man and earth and man and animals, the spiritual leaders looked for a path of action to describe the personal behavior necessary to keep people balanced and in tune with the rhythms of nature. Thus it was that the dances came about. Noticing that the birds and animals expressed themselves through dancing, the people celebrated their good fortune in the same manner. Dances can be classified as those of thanksgiving, petitioning, and celebration. Of course, there were no hard-and-fast distinctions made among the dance expressions since everything was intertwined in the minds of the people. Thus one might perform the sun dance as thanksgiving for benefits received, while another might be petitioning for good luck and assistance.

The buffalo dance and the war dance were held to seek good luck in war and hunting. These dances were public occasions in which the whole village participated. Some of the secular dances, if we would trace them back to the philosophical roots of the people, were probably originally thanksgiving and petitioning activities, although they have changed into a purely secular activity over the course of time. Participating in the dances meant creating a community mind through the melding of individual motives and energies. Thus people saw themselves as the co-creators of the future in the world in which they lived.

Revelations came to individuals, even though a heavy emphasis was placed on community religious cohesion. Young people were encouraged to undertake vision quests in order to discover the future pattern of their lives and to receive special powers through relationships with birds and animals that could benefit the community. Dreams could also provide a person with information and powers that could not be obtained by either experimentation or logical reasoning. There was no question that a person receiving a

dream in which medicines were revealed, songs of power taught, or the future revealed, was a special individual in the eyes of the spirits. Dreams were an unexpected gift that was cherished and remembered. They could not be invoked or faked, which made them more valuable.

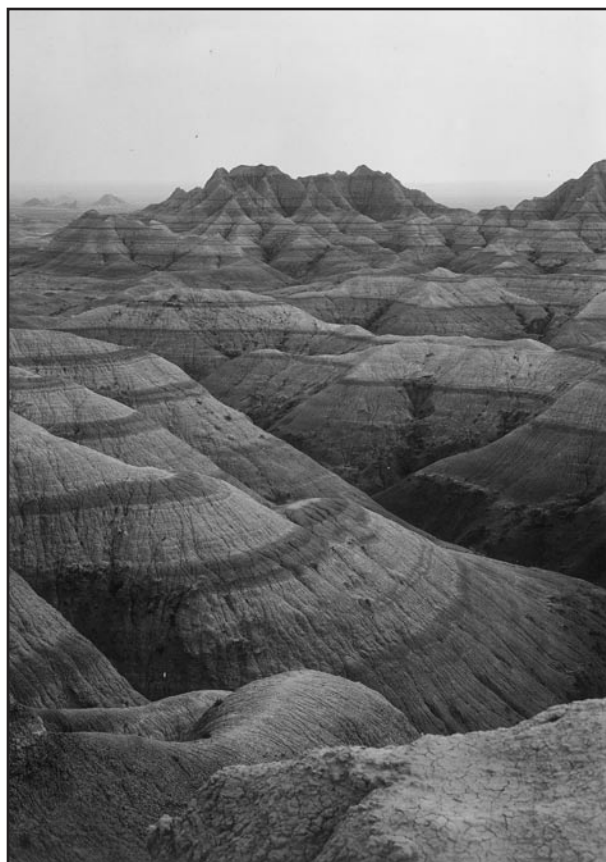
Visions were unique experiences in which people found themselves suddenly transported from their immediate physical surroundings and thrust into a strange, yet physical, world in which birds and animals conversed easily with them and frequently changed shapes to demonstrate the unity of entities in the world of spirit. Again they might receive a song to use to call a spirit helper or might be told about an herb that would be useful for a specific purpose, such as treating a wound or sickness, healing a horse, making a person invisible to the game and so forth. Sometimes the person experiencing a vision would return with a physical object he had received during the course of the vision.

So important were the messages from the spirits that the tribes devised a way to invoke visions, and since these experiences were similar to the dream scenarios, they called these invited experiences dreams or visions also. In *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, the old men describing their religious experiences were careful to distinguish between visions and special dreams. Although they used the general term “dreaming,” they readily distinguished the means by which their information and experience had come.

The most commonly used path to make contact with the higher powers was called, of course, the vision quest or *hanblechi*. In this practice, a person, usually a man, would offer himself by fasting on a high hill for four days or until he received a vision that would tell him something of his future life or enable him to make contact with some bird or animal that would take pity on him and be his friend. To ensure success, or at least enhance the promise of a favorable outcome, the person seeking the vision would ask a spiritual elder to supervise his quest. After receiving instructions from the elder and participating in a sweat lodge ritual to ensure his cleanliness, he would go to the top of a high hill and begin praying to the Great Mysterious, announcing that he was lamenting, with the hope that pity would be shown him by the spirits.

Some remarkable experiences occurred in these vision quests, and the supervising elder would always know what the lamenter was experiencing on the hill as the quest continued. Birds and animals might approach the person and encourage him with short cries of gladness. Insects might relate that the spirits were pleased with the effort being made by the person. Out-of-body episodes or psychological disconnects that changed the ability to see or hear might occur. A person might be taken to another place, sometimes into a location that would be important in his future, sometimes across the world to see distant lands or into the structure of the cosmos to see the breadth of life being infused into every living creature. Indians were not surprised to learn about the large oceans far from the prairies because they had flown over them or walked along their shores in these visions. After a vision had occurred or the four days had been completed, the person would come down from the hill, participate in another sweat lodge for cleansing, eat, and then relate parts of his experience to the supervising elder.

The distinguishing characteristic of the vision quest was that it represented the initiative of the human being in seeking the approval of the higher powers and consequently differed from the spontaneous dreams that others received. People might go on a vision quest several times during their lives, and they might also be enabled to undergo variations of this ritual based on the powers they had received in their initial contact. Indeed, the effort by individuals to separate themselves from the camp circle and go into



Erosion by wind and rain over countless millennia produced the stark beauty characteristic of the Badlands. *Center for Western Studies.*

the wilderness seeking counsel and advice through the medium of solitude and contemplation might well be considered a formal vision quest since many revelations came from these kinds of experiences.

Many young men sought to avoid the formal vision quest ritual because they knew that the life of a spiritual leader had many pitfalls and required a person of great moral strength to perform the tasks required. Sometimes the person was called to a vision quest by voices that continually sought his attention and directed him to offer himself in the ritual. One of the great contemporary medicine men at Rosebud said that he resisted doing this ritual for many years, but over that time period voices would remind him of the eventual need to undertake the experience. The great fear was that the person receiving a vision might be asked to undertake a life of poverty and humility or to sacrifice himself for the people without thought of reward. For the average person, these burdens were hardly welcome. Thus the commitment to the vision became a serious task.

One requirement of both the vision quest and the dream was the practice of enacting part of the vision or performing some feat that displayed the powers received in the sacred experience. That is to say, one could not merely speak of receiving an herb or medicine, but a person had to produce the herb and demonstrate its potency. Black Elk had a vision of dancing horses and later had to organize a dance wherein the people, symbolizing the horses, reenacted part of the scenario of his vision. Unlike faith healers and evangelists of today, Dakotas receiving powers had to display those gifts in front of the whole community. Healings had to be permanent; prophecies had to be fulfilled. No one could make claims that could not be demonstrated when the need arose.

The sweat lodge had an all-purpose function in that it was used as a means of cleansing oneself prior to undertaking another ritual such as the sun dance or vision quest, and it also produced powerful experiences when done for its own sake. A special hut was built in the shape of a hemisphere and covered with hides. In the center would be a hole dug in the earth into which people placed red-hot rocks. During the ceremony they threw water on these rocks four times as the ritual progressed. Medicine men would seek out specific rocks and find people who agreed that they would participate in the ritual. Participants say that when the spirits came into the lodge they could hear them as

they encountered the hide coverings. The sweat lodge is the most popular and frequently conducted ritual today and, unfortunately, the ritual most often copied by non-Indian imitators.

A ritual not mentioned by either Joseph Brown or Ella Deloria is the Yuwipi. This ceremony goes far back in Dakota/Lakota history and has been performed over the years by many people who also have other powers. It follows a unique format not found in any other ritual and is performed at night. The practitioner's hands and fingers are bound tightly with rawhide or leather thongs until they are immobile. He is then completely wrapped in quilts, originally buffalo hides, which are also bound with leather straps all around him. He sings his songs in total darkness and the spirits come, manifesting themselves usually in little blue lights. Sometimes the spirits form circles and dance; other times they move rapidly around the room.

The spirits then converse with the spiritual leader, answer questions, and provide information requested by people at the ceremony. He can heal illnesses or give directions on what medicines to take, locate lost objects, or give advice about the future. When the purpose of the Yuwipi is fulfilled, the helpers light the room and the practitioner is seen sitting calmly with the quilts nicely folded, the leather thongs and straps neatly coiled in piles. Yuwipis are also popular today and conducted on reservations and in cities, performed by Yuwipi men from the reservations. Since healing is a major concern, descriptions of this ritual are often found in medical literature.

A major emphasis of Dakota/Lakota spirituality has always been establishing a proper relationship with the spiritual powers of the world. Birds and animals play an important role in every ceremony, if only because they are represented by the use of their physical body parts, the part representing the whole creature. Unlike Western religions, which exclude the living creatures of the world in ceremonies, the Dakota/Lakota religious traditions always seek to include the invisible powers of the natural world so that a ceremony becomes an expression by living things of their relationship to the earth.

During the 1920s, Indian people began embracing another indigenous religious tradition when practitioners of ceremonies using the peyote cactus plant fruit came into the northern plains. In some ways it was a response to the forced conversion of people once they were confined to reservations, although some of the southern plains tribes had traditions of using the plant in ceremonies long before that. In prolonged nighttime rituals involving the ingestion of the "button" or drinking a broth brewed with these fruits, people prayed before a traditional Indian altar and sought healings and prophesy. While missionaries and traditional practitioners opposed the spread of this religion, known as the Native American Church, it came to be seen as a valid indigenous expression of religious devotion, and in visions, when a person was offered a path to follow, it was included as a worthy vocation.

The Native American Church of South Dakota has been incorporated and has its own rituals and doctrines similar to those of other tribes in adjoining states. Today some traditional spiritual leaders also practice this faith just as they adhere to Roman Catholic and Protestant teachings and attend Christian services. The motto of many Dakota/Lakota people has been to accept whatever is good in other traditions and to find the path best suited for them to follow. Federal recognition of the church has meant protection from unnecessary harassment under the drug and narcotic laws. The Native American Church has been successful notably in combating alcoholism and domestic problems, although some religious conflict has occurred in families over membership in the church.