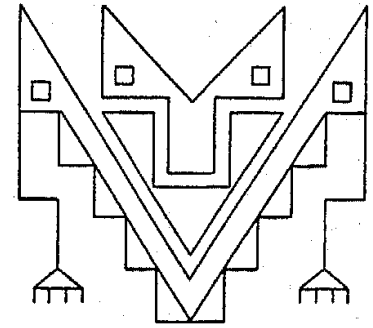


THE SACRED PIPE



BLACK ELK'S ACCOUNT

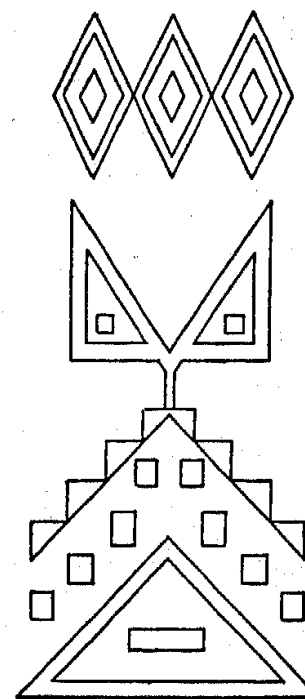
OF THE SEVEN RITES OF THE OGLALA SIOUX

RECORDED & EDITED BY

JOSEPH EPES BROWN

PENGUIN BOOKS

CHAPTER I



THE GIFT OF THE SACRED PIPE

Early one morning, very many winters ago, two Lakota were out hunting with their bows and arrows, and as they were standing on a hill looking for game, they saw in the distance something coming towards them in a very strange and wonderful manner. When this mysterious thing came nearer to them, they saw that it was a very beautiful woman, dressed in white buckskin, and bearing a bundle on her back. Now this woman was so good to look at that one of the Lakota had bad intentions and told his friend of his desire, but this good man said that he must not have such thoughts, for surely this is a *wakan* woman.¹ The mysterious person was now very close to the men, and then putting down her bundle, she asked the one with bad intentions to come over to her. As the

¹ Throughout this work I shall translate the Lakota word *wakan* as "holy" or "sacred," rather than as "power" or "powerful" as used by some

young man approached the mysterious woman, they were both covered by a great cloud, and soon when it lifted the sacred woman was standing there, and at her feet was the man with the bad thoughts who was now nothing but bones, and terrible snakes were eating him.²

"Behold what you see!" the strange woman said to the good man. "I am coming to your people and wish to talk with your chief *Hehlokecha Najin* [Standing Hollow Horn]. Return to him, and tell him to prepare a large tipi in which he should gather all his people, and make ready for my coming. I wish to tell you something of great importance!"

The young man then returned to the tipi of his chief, and told him all that had happened: that this *wakan* woman was coming to visit them and that they must all prepare. The chief, Standing Hollow Horn, then had several tipis taken down, and from them a great lodge was made as the sacred woman had instructed.³ He sent out a crier to tell the people to put on their best buckskin clothes and to gather immediately in the lodge. The people were, of course, all very excited as they waited in the great lodge for the coming of the holy woman, and everybody was wondering where this mysterious woman came from and what it was that she wished to say.

Soon the young men who were watching for the coming of the *wakan* person announced that they saw something in the dis-

ethnologists. This latter term may be a true translation, yet is not really complete, for with the Sioux, and with all traditional peoples in general, the "power" (really the sacredness) of a being or a thing is in proportion to its nearness to its prototype; or better, it is in proportion to the ability of the object or act to reflect most directly the principle or principles which are in *Wakan-Tanka*, the Great Spirit, who is One.

² Black Elk emphasized that this should not only be taken as an event in time, but also as an eternal truth. "Any man," he said, "who is attached to the senses and to the things of this world, is one who lives in ignorance and is being consumed by the snakes which represent his own passions."

³ The Sioux ceremonial lodge is constructed with twenty-eight poles. One of these poles is the "key," holding up all the others, and this pole the holy men say represents *Wakan-Tanka*, who sustains the universe, which is represented by the lodge as a whole.

tance approaching them in a beautiful manner, and then suddenly she entered the lodge, walked around sun-wise,⁴ and stood in front of Standing Hollow Horn.⁵ She took from her back the bundle, and holding it with both hands in front of the chief, said: "Behold this and always love it! It is *lela wakan* [very sacred], and you must treat it as such. No impure man should ever be allowed to see it, for within this bundle there is a sacred pipe. With this you will, during the winters to come, send your voices to *Wakan-Tanka*, your Father and Grandfather."⁶

After the mysterious woman said this, she took from the bundle a pipe, and also a small round stone which she placed upon the ground. Holding the pipe up with its stem to the heavens, she said: "With this sacred pipe you will walk upon the Earth; for the

⁴ The sun-wise or clockwise circumambulation is almost always used by the Sioux; occasionally, however, the counter-clockwise movement is used in a dance or some occasion prior to or after a great catastrophe, for this movement is in imitation of the Thunder-beings who always act in an anti-natural way and who come in a terrifying manner, often bringing destruction.

The reason for the sun-wise circumambulation was once explained by Black Elk in this manner: "Is not the south the source of life, and does not the flowering stick truly come from there? And does not man advance from there toward the setting sun of his life? Then does he not approach the colder north where the white hairs are? And does he not then arrive, if he lives, at the source of light and understanding, which is the east? Then does he not return to where he began, to his second childhood, there to give back his life to all life, and his flesh to the earth whence it came? The more you think about this, the more meaning you will see in it." (*Black Elk Speaks*, recorded by John G. Neihardt).

⁵ Standing Hollow Horn, as leader of his people, should be seated at the west, the place of honor; for in sitting at the west of a tipi, one faces the door, or east, from which comes the light, representing wisdom, and this illumination a leader must always possess if he is to guide his people in a sacred manner.

⁶ *Wakan-Tanka* as Grandfather is the Great Spirit independent of manifestation, unqualified, unlimited, identical to the Christian Godhead, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Nirguna*. *Wakan-Tanka* as Father is the Great Spirit considered in relation to His manifestation, either as Creator, Preserver, or Destroyer, identical to the Christian God, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Saguna*.

Earth is your Grandmother and Mother,⁷ and She is sacred. Every step that is taken upon Her should be as a prayer. The bowl of this pipe is of red stone; it is the Earth. Carved in the stone and facing the center is this buffalo calf who represents all the four-leggeds⁸ who live upon your Mother. The stem of the pipe is of wood, and this represents all that grows upon the Earth. And these twelve feathers which hang here where the stem fits into the bowl are from *Wanbli Galeshka*, the Spotted Eagle,⁹ and they represent the eagle and all the wingeds of the air. All these peoples, and all the things of the universe, are joined to you who smoke the pipe—all send their voices to *Wakan-Tanka*, the Great Spirit.

⁷ As in the distinction made within *Wakan-Tanka* between Grandfather and Father, so the Earth is considered under two aspects, that of Mother and Grandmother. The former is the earth considered as the producer of all growing forms, in act; whereas Grandmother refers to the ground or substance of all growing things—potentiality. This distinction is the same as that made by the Christian Scholastics between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.

⁸ The buffalo was to the Sioux the most important of all four-legged animals, for it supplied their food, their clothing, and even their houses, which were made from the tanned hides. Because the buffalo contained all these things within himself, and for many other reasons, he was a natural symbol of the universe, the totality of all manifested forms. Everything is symbolically contained within this animal: the earth and all that grows from her, all animals, and even the two-legged peoples; and each specific part of the beast represents for the Indian, one of these "parts" of creation. Also the buffalo has four legs, and these represent the four ages which are an integral condition of creation.

⁹ Since *Wanbli Galeshka* (the Spotted Eagle) flies the highest of all created creatures and sees everything, he is regarded as *Wakan-Tanka* under certain aspects. He is a solar bird, His feathers being regarded as rays of the sun, and when one is carried or worn by the Indian it represents, or rather is, the "Real Presence." In wearing the eagle-feathered "war-bonnet," the wearer actually becomes the eagle, which is to say that he identifies himself, his real Self, with *Wakan-Tanka*.

The Spotted Eagle corresponds exactly, in the Hindu tradition, to the *Buddhi*, which is the Intellect, or the formless and transcendent principle of all manifestation; further, the *Buddhi* is often expressed as being a ray directly emanating from the *Atma*, the spiritual sun.

From this it should be clear what is really being expressed in the often misunderstood Ghost Dance song: "*Wanbli galeshka wana ni he o who e,*" "The Spotted Eagle is coming to carry me away."

When you pray with this pipe, you pray for and with everything."

The *wakan* woman then touched the foot of the pipe to the round stone which lay upon the ground, and said: "With this pipe you will be bound to all your relatives: your Grandfather and Father, your Grandmother and Mother. This round rock, which is made of the same red stone as the bowl of the pipe, your Father *Wakan-Tanka* has also given to you. It is the Earth, your Grandmother and Mother, and it is where you will live and increase. This Earth which He has given to you is red, and the two-leggeds who live upon the Earth are red; and the Great Spirit has also given to you a red day, and a red road.¹⁰ All of this is sacred and so do not forget! Every dawn as it comes is a holy event, and every day is holy, for the light comes from your Father *Wakan-Tanka*; and also you must always remember that the two-leggeds and all the other peoples who stand upon this earth are sacred and should be treated as such.

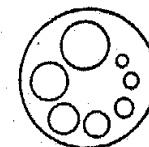
"From this time on, the holy pipe will stand upon this red Earth, and the two-leggeds will take the pipe and will send their voices to *Wakan-Tanka*. These seven circles¹¹ which you see on the stone have much meaning, for they represent the seven rites in which the pipe will be used. The first large circle represents the first rite which I shall give to you, and the other six circles represent the rites which will in time be revealed to you directly.¹² Stand-

¹⁰ The "red road" is that which runs north and south and is the good or straight way, for to the Sioux the north is purity and the south is the source of life. This "red road" is thus similar to the Christian "straight and narrow way"; it is the vertical of the cross, or the *ec-cirata el-mustaqim* of the Islamic tradition.

On the other hand, there is the "blue" or "black road" of the Sioux, which runs east and west and which is the path of error and destruction. He who travels on this path is, Black Elk has said, "one who is distracted, who is ruled by his senses, and who lives for himself rather than for his people."

¹¹ The seven circles are arranged in this manner:

¹² According to Black Elk, two of these rites were known to the Sioux prior to the coming of the sacred Woman; these were the purification rites of the sweat lodge, and the *Hanblecheyapi* (crying for a vision); the ritual of the pipe was, however, now added to both of these.



ing Hollow Horn, be good to these gifts and to your people, for they are *wakan!* With this pipe the two-leggeds will increase, and there will come to them all that is good. From above *Wakan-Tanka* has given to you this sacred pipe, so that through it you may have knowledge. For this great gift you should always be grateful! But now before I leave I wish to give to you instructions for the first rite in which your people will use this pipe.

"It should be for you a sacred day when one of your people dies. You must then keep his soul¹³ as I shall teach you, and through this you will gain much power; for if this soul is kept, it will increase in you your concern and love for your neighbor. So long as the person, in his soul, is kept with your people, through him you will be able to send your voice to *Wakan-Tanka*.¹⁴

"It should also be a sacred day when a soul is released and returns to its home, *Wakan-Tanka*, for on this day four women will be made holy, and they will in time bear children who will walk the path of life in a sacred manner, setting an example to your people. Behold Me, for it is I that they will take in their mouths, and it is through this that they will become *wakan*.

"He who keeps the soul of a person must be a good and pure

¹³ In translating the Lakota word *wanagi*, I have used the term "soul" in preference to "spirit," which has been used by many ethnologists; I believe this term, understood in its scholastic Christian sense, to be more accurate, for what is kept and purified in this rite is really the totality of the psychic entities of the being, which, although localized within a particular gross form (usually the lock of hair), are really of a subtle nature, intermediate between the gross body and the pure spirit. At the same time it should always be remembered that it is the pure spirit, which is the presence of *Wakan-Tanka*, which is at the "center" of both the subtle and gross entities. The soul is thus kept in the manner to be described so that there may be a prolongation of the individual state and, thus, that the subtle or psychic part of the being may be purified, so that a virtual liberation will be achieved. This corresponds very closely to the Christian state of Purgatory. For further explanation of this important question, see René Guénon, *Man and His Becoming* (London, 1945).

¹⁴ "It is good," Black Elk has said, "to have a reminder of death before us, for it helps us to understand the impermanence of life on this earth, and this understanding may aid us in preparing for our own death. He who is well prepared is he who knows that he is nothing compared with *Wakan-Tanka*, who is everything; then he knows that world which is real."

man, and he should use the pipe so that all the people, with the soul, will together send their voices to *Wakan-Tanka*. The fruit of your Mother the Earth and the fruit of all that bears will be blessed in this manner, and your people will then walk the path of life in a sacred way. Do not forget that *Wakan-Tanka* has given you seven days in which to send your voices to Him. So long as you remember this you will live; the rest you will know from *Wakan-Tanka* directly."

The sacred woman then started to leave the lodge, but turning again to Standing Hollow Horn, she said: "Behold this pipe! Always remember how sacred it is, and treat it as such, for it will take you to the end. Remember, in me there are four ages.¹⁵ I am leaving now, but I shall look back upon your people in every age, and at the end I shall return."

Moving around the lodge in a sun-wise manner, the mysterious woman left, but after walking a short distance she looked back towards the people and sat down. When she rose the people were amazed to see that she had become a young red and brown buffalo calf. Then this calf walked farther, lay down, and rolled, looking back at the people, and when she got up she was a white buffalo. Again the white buffalo walked farther and rolled on the ground, becoming now a black buffalo. This buffalo then walked farther away from the people, stopped, and after bowing to each of the four quarters of the universe, disappeared over the hill.

¹⁵ According to Siouan mythology, it is believed that at the beginning of the cycle a buffalo was placed at the west in order to hold back the waters. Every year this buffalo loses one hair, and every age he loses one leg. When all his hair and all four legs are gone, then the waters rush in once again, and the cycle comes to an end.

A striking parallel to this myth is found in the Hindu tradition, where it is the Bull *Dharma* (the divine law) who has four legs, each of which represents an age of the total cycle. During the course of these four ages (*yugas*) true spirituality becomes increasingly obscured, until the cycle (*manvantara*) closes with a catastrophe, after which the primordial spirituality is restored, and the cycle begins once again.

It is believed by both the American Indian and the Hindu that at the present time the buffalo or bull is on his last leg, and he is very nearly bald. Corresponding beliefs could be cited from many other traditions. See René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (London, 1942).