

COSMOLOGY AND THE REINVENTION OF CULTURE: THE LAKOTA CASE

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

Far from being a static entity, cosmology is dynamic, changing and moving through time as ritual moves through space. During some forty years of work with Lakota people, the author has noted the relative nature of mythology and cosmology. It is possible for him to perceive the open reinvention of culture to suit the particular circumstances of living people.

Loin d'être une entité statique, la cosmologie est dynamique, elle change et bouge à travers le temps tout comme le rituel se met en marche à travers l'espace. Pendant environ quarante ans de travail avec les gens du Lakota, l'auteur a constaté la nature relative de la mythologie et de la cosmologie. Il est possible pour lui de percevoir la réinvention ouverte de la culture pour convenir aux circonstances particulières des vivants.

This paper is about cosmology, its inventions and reinvention. And although cosmology as a science of itself, has been treated traditionally as an absolute cultural charter, much in the same way Mallnowski used the term "charter" in referring to the nature of mythology, I break with this tradition of absolutism.¹ I agree that cosmology, which I see as a first-cause mythology, is intended or invented by humans to rationalize symbolically their universe and to justify what they believe to be its orderliness. I believe that cosmology is further invented to account for particular processes through which people believe their universes traverse.

Firstly, all people believe in specific attributes which precipitate the origin of their universe. Secondly, they agree that once originated there is an orderliness in the process which their universe evolved or developed, even though occasionally this perceived orderliness may be perplexed by chaos. This second part of the process also explicates their own creation. The third part of the process emphasizes what we know most about, the rituals and myths that are stated and performed for the purpose of maintaining some sense of order between peoples, and between peoples and the other part of the environment, and between peoples and gods. Myths and rituals provide a means of enacting or reenacting and thus codify rules whereby people understand what behaviours are required of them, or disallowed, in order to maintain a sense of belonging to their own culture. The sum total of these myths and rituals also may be viewed as a means of determining self-awareness and awareness of others, and are thus expressive of what each culture perceives as morality. Finally, an important part of the process which must be accounted for is the possible or potential demise of the universe, and of course this is reenacted microcosmically with the demise of every individual.

Rather than viewing this processual model of cosmology as a static, motionless body of knowledge that unswervingly defines and describes the parameters of specific cultures, that is to say, this *absolute* view of cosmological principles, I instead prefer to define cosmology as a *relative* system of beliefs and rituals which people redefine continuously in order to accommodate the exigencies of everyday life, and rationalize sometimes through reinvention of the cosmology, their behavior toward these exigencies.²

Cosmology moves through time just as ritual moves through space. And as I have suggested elsewhere³ for mythology, cosmology may be treated as a *dynamic* entity rather than its more usual form of static one. Leach's notion that ritual and myth are two aspects of the same phenomenon still obtains well as a particular analytical frame found in British and American functionalism.⁴ But I think that the analysis of cosmology as

a form of ritual is more interesting and more useful in understanding culture in its empirical reality.

Some of my thinking has been shaped by the fact that I have spent a great deal of time among one cultural group, the Lakota, particularly the Oglala of the Pine Ridge reservation and the Sicangu (Brulé) of the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. When I say one cultural group, I mean, more or less one cultural group, one that would also include other Lakota-speakers in the same state of South Dakota, as well as those living in other states and in Canada. Most of them acknowledge a cultural and historic kinship with each other despite the fact there are minor language and cultural differences among these peoples, particularly since the establishment of the reservation system which itself tended to isolate Lakota groups from each other and to some extent still does, except nowadays it is more at the level of ideological than empirical isolation.⁵

Spending such a long time, nearly 40 years, with one group of American Indians living in the same geographic area makes one view the Lakota universe somewhat differently from those anthropologists, religionists, or historians (today anyone who studies Indians) whose stay in the past has been somewhat shorter. One begins to see that the questions that are frequently posed by these scholars are not all that relevant when absolute cosmological charters are applied to the *living*. Thus all those questions about what is "authentic," what is "correct," what is "real," what is "traditional," what is "true," require relative, not absolute, answers. If we continue to view cosmology as absolute then we shall wind up being nothing much more than historical critics (rather than critical historians) believing in what our ancestors told us rather than what the Indians' ancestors told them, assuming that there is a difference between what each set of ancestors had to say.

This is because we have been plagued by the notion of cultural purity, a belief that there is a period of time in which cultures somehow lie stagnant, devoid of any initiative of change in some limpid environment. In this putative period, we believe that cultures are somehow closer to nature, and there is a further belief that purity and primitiveness are somewhat romantically related, although we find it harder and harder to admit it. There is also a concomitant belief that all is well on this primitive cultural scene until the ugly European/American raises his uglier head and begins to taint an otherwise blissfully natural culture. Of course, as humanists and scientists we cannot tolerate this kind of thinking; nevertheless, we are confronted with it everyday, sometimes to the extent that it is easier to ignore the claims of purity than challenge them.

Of course, cultures have been changing; they have been evolving; and they continue to do so. There is no doubt that cultural domination greatly

accelerates cultural change, but we should not be misled into believing that cultures do not change selfishly. Just like Dawkin's selfish genes,⁶ whole cultures are quite capable of employing strategies that incorporate foreign technologies into their own culture so that cultures do not desist just because they have been dominated. In fact, they continue to exist with a kind of hybrid vigor, sometimes quite well.

Cosmology, I think, like other aspects of that thing we call culture, should be seen as a viable, malleable entity, and like culture, cosmology provides the rationale for the manner in which humans adapt to their environments, including how they adapt to other cultures which are likewise part of the overall environment. If we understood the flexibility of culture and its cosmological reasons for being, then we would no longer speak of the notion of purity in race, in culture, in language, except as a hypothetical construct. We would also be capable of understanding that over years what people have to say about their own cultural inventions and reinventions changes, but what is important to recognize in order to understand the nature of culture and cosmology is that similarities and differences between peoples and cultures are much more fascinating if viewed from the vantage of continuity in culture, than they are from the disadvantage of cultural change. We would also be able to dispense with another concomitant of the purity in culture scenario, that is the value judgements that we constantly assign to cosmology. Unfortunately, cosmology under our present view must be regarded as right or wrong. Let me give an example.

I once gave a talk at a conference on Plains Indians about the use of color symbolism in Lakota religion. In passing I named the colors, which according to my Lakota colleagues were black, red, yellow, and white. I argued in the paper that these colors were manipulated by Lakotas in order to make them relevant not only to the past, but to the present world, and in particular the contemporary political world. Although "traditionally" if one may use the term, the colors referred to, among other things, the four directions, younger Lakotas were now using them to distinguish what they perceived to be the four great races of mankind. Thus, the color black symbolized the domain of the West Wind, but also Black people. Similarly, red, for the north, symbolized Indians; yellow, the east, Asians; and white, north, Caucasians. One Lakota political activist, upon making a speech before a Puerto Rican assembly in New York City, alluded to the fact that when one mixed the sacred colors together they turned brown - at which point, the audience, most of whom were Puerto Rican, gave a resounding and thunderous applause.

After finishing my anecdote, a colleague in the audience who was also a Lakota specialist stated that I - or my Lakota colleagues - had gotten it

all wrong because James Owen Dorsey, a well-known ethnographer associated with the Bureau of American Ethnology, had reported that among the same people the sacred colors were blue, red, black, and yellow (Dorsey, 1894). Inherent in this specialist's statement was the implication that what was written was right, or what was reported by older Lakotas to older ethnographers was somehow more acceptable than the same information reported between my Lakota colleagues and myself. The argument that ensued, of course, had nothing to do with color symbolism; it had to do with what I see as the difference between absolute and relative values associated with cosmology. An absolute view rendered a moral judgement on the text, where a relative view rendered no judgement on the text; the latter simply showed that the text was different. From a relativist point of view then, both anthropologist and Indian were right in both generations. From an absolute perspective, only one set of colleagues were correct. And of course, my Lakota colleagues and I were wrong.

How many other examples of other tribes, other places, other times could we give? And how would a relativist perspective change what we know, or rather what we think we know, about the tribal world? How would a relativist perspective allow us to explain cosmological phenomena? And would we have any greater power in analyzing human nature among American Indian peoples as well as others given that the absolutist/relativist dyad must work as well among all people of the world - including our own elitist group that writes most of the rules of analysis for all these people?

Under the banner of relativism how could we begin to discuss such terms as revival and revitalization? I mean, after all if the cosmological charter is not absolute, then on what basis could we possibly know if tribal peoples are undergoing revivalistic or revitalistic movements? From what empirical cultural ritual or belief could we start? What cosmological fact would we deem abandoned so as to create a need for a revival or revitalization? If cosmology is relative to begin with, so then is everything that follows. Nothing is renewed, nothing is revived, nothing is revitalized. Everything is simply different, not like it was before, present but in a different context, absent but not necessarily forsaken, same structure, as I prefer, but different content. Things do not change as much as they exhibit differential continuity, at least until they disappear through extinction or through what every diehard evolutionist is still anticipating: assimilation.⁷

The absolutist position with respect to cosmology also gives rise to another, or is at least part of another, absolutist position such as what to do with concepts like noble savage and just plain savage; to traditional religion as opposed to contemporary; to old time versus modern. All oppositions which may be interpreted by concomitant value judgements, to wit noble,

traditional, and old time, are somehow superior to savage, contemporary, and modern. For years it was commonly believed in Europe and parts of the United States that the real true Indians died off around 1850, a belief which continues to be subscribed to by some and which still elicits surprise and amazement from contemporary American Indians. This absolutist perspective sees certain traits that are undeniably Indian as vanishing - certain behaviour, characteristics, diagnostic features having to do with clothing, transportation, locomotion, music, dance - all material things that are highly visible and all of which are seen as being replaced by technologies generally associated with the white man. Furthermore, the white man has become the living authority on the American Indian, not the Indian himself. And frequently, anthropologists and others grounded in the absolutist school are quite vociferous in reprimanding living Indians for not performing their sacred ceremonies properly. It might be argued that a good deal of American Indian cosmological considerations may have been invented or reinvented by the white man creating a near obsession with literary characters such as Black Elk, who has become another Billy Budd hanging from the Sun dance pole instead of a yard arm?⁸

And how many Black Elks are appearing on the contemporary cosmological scene today? Not only do we have the fictive culture of a white man's dream of Indian tradition looming large on the academic scene, but today contemporary Indians have raised his status to that of saint, that is, all but those contemporary Oglala, many of whom are named Black Elk. They recognize that what is appealing about their grandfather is mostly fabricated out of the poetry of a white man, and they understand that a good part of contemporary Lakota culture, if not generalized American Indian culture, is based on the "teachings" of Black Elk, a body of text sometimes more reminiscent of a summer vacation bible school than a Lakota paradise. BUt rather than dwell on other peoples' inventions, let me turn to my ideas about the reinvention of culture.

The Reinvention Of Culture

Cultural reinvention refers to the frequent discrepancy that occurs between cultural theory and cultural practice. It refers to the general process of cultural change, but it is a special case in which cultural facts of one period of time become deconstructed for whatever reason, by force, voluntarily, through boredom, irrelevancy, etc., only later to be reconstructed. Over the reconstruction, the cultural theory is retained. By theory I mean an individual's or group's perception of what really happened in their own historic traditions. By cultural practice, I mean the contemporary enactment,

or reenactment of the myths and rituals employed to rationalize this cultural theory.

The perfect metaphor for this sort of process is Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* in which the *bricoleur* refashions new things of the shreds and patches of things he has salvaged.⁹ Important here, is that once the old things are deconstructed in order to provide the structural entities of the reconstructions, the functions of those original constructions in the process often radically change. The new structure, completed out of cultural grave-robbings of an anthropological frankenstein, now has a completely different function relative to its constituent parts and their relations to still earlier constructions.

So cultural reinvention then is reconstruction of a deconstruction of constructions. Again in the process of this reinvention, the discrepancy between theory and practice to which I have just alluded provides to the older generation who lived through the cultural period prior to deconstruction, a sense that the younger generation is participating in a traditional culture in which it does not completely understand the earlier cultural theories and practices. In some cases, the older Lakota say that the younger are just "playing with it" (*yuha skatapli*) and their sense of Lakota culture is *wojapi* (a thickened fruit soup) whose ingredients are appropriately all mixed up. We might conclude that what the older generation is saying is that the theory is right but the practice is wrong, or the practice is right but the theory is wrong. Let me give you an example of each.

In the first case, the theory is right but the practice is wrong, the current reinvention relies on what is perceived to be an historic and cultural truth. Take, for example, the Sun dance. Today, everyone agrees about the purpose of the Sun dance as communal form of worship. There has been a long unbroken tradition of the Sun dance and since 1959 the Lakota have returned publicly to participating in various aspects of the dance which have been referred to by its most visible diagnostic feature, the piercing of flesh, and dragging of buffalo skulls. Underlying this aspect of the dance is the philosophy that the human body is the only thing that a person owns, so that if one is to offer up thanks to the gods, then offering one's flesh is the only appropriate manner of doing it.¹⁰

But in practice, the older Sun dance was performed annually, usually before the summer buffalo hunts, a custom which was carried on through the years until 1972, the year before the occupation of Wounded Knee. This particular Sun dance is sometimes referred to as the AIM Sun dance, named after the American Indian Movement,¹¹ many of whose members actually participated and pierced that summer. After this time, the practice of the Sun dance changed drastically. The movement, the occupation, and its after-

math literally split families in two, half supporting AIM, the other half fighting it. Hence it was almost impossible to sponsor the same kinds of communal functions as were witnessed in the past, because it was difficult to overcome the animosity borne out of the Wounded Knee occupation. Thus, the communal Sun dance at Pine Ridge continued, but not at the traditional Sun dance grounds, as an AIM-sponsored function, while nonaligned traditionalists participated in what have come to be known as private Sun dances, frequently danced by only a few members of a family, a medicine man, and a singer. Private Sun dances also earned the reputation of being "by invitation only," which in part, according to the older people, contradicts the significance and spirit of the Sun dance as a communal form of worship.

In reverse, some of the older generation believe that the practice may be right, but the theory is wrong. For example, not too many years ago, a young man decided that he wanted to perform one of the famous *Heyoka* feats of thrusting his hand into a kettle of boiling water without burning it. This man was young enough to guarantee that he had never witnessed this ceremony and probably knew about it more from anthropological texts than from oral tradition. Nevertheless, at a large gathering, with a great audience assembled, a kettle of water was boiled, and the man was marched out to the center of the dance area accompanied by a medicine man and his assistant. Now according to Native Lakota theory, only people who had dreamed of certain things usually associated with lightning and thunder could accomplish these feats without harm to themselves.

In this instance, after having this type of vision, the man prevailed upon a medicine man for guidance. At the moment of truth, however, at that point at which the visionary was about to thrust his hand into the boiling water in the presence of a large gathering, he had a change of heart and refused to follow through. The medicine man, recognizing that the dictates of the vision had to be obeyed, lest harm should fall, grabbed the reluctant candidate by one arm and thrust his hand into the kettle. The theory was right: *Heyokas* who dream of lightning sometimes thrust their hands into boiling water and furthermore complain that it is cold. In this contemporary practice, however, no protective herbs were rubbed on the man's arm and hands, and no one is quite sure, including the anthropologists whose books the unwary devotee had read, whether the practice was done as they reported it. The screaming man's hand unsurprisingly was scalded; it received third degree burns. The initiate subsequently tried to sue the medicine man for malpractice but was unsuccessful. This is a clear-cut case in which the theory is wrong but the practice, as far as everyone believed, was absolutely correct.

The major point here is that cultural reinvention is partly defined on the visible discrepancy between cultural theory and cultural practice, and recog-

nizes either the one or the other is correct according to cultural traditions that are believed to be customary. If both theory and practice were perceived to be incorrect, then we would be witnessing an invention and not a reinvention.

The Exaggeration Of Culture

Now I would like to turn to another concept, that of cultural exaggeration, which is the visible expression of cultural reinvention. And I would like to begin with an abstraction.

If one can imagine a set of intersecting axes, the vertical axis representing time, and the horizontal axis representing space, it is possible to contrast the ubiquitous terms *social* and *cultural* in a way that will help elucidate what I mean by the reinvention of culture, and its important concomitant feature, exaggeration.

In this abstraction, culture is indicated by the vertical line, a line which symbolizes a peoples' perception of its own history and traditions across sometimes great spans of generations. What is significant about this cultural line is that once people perceive this line to be in danger of eradication, or cultural extinction if you will, the farther back this line is pushed, as if the deepening of the cultural line of descent somehow insures its continuation. Today, an important part of Lakota cosmology emphasizes that the white man's Beringian hypothesis cannot possibly obtain for American Indians since a reinvented cosmology suggests that American Indian culture goes back perhaps 75,000 years, which in Euroamerican scientific terms would make this period one in which *homo sapiens* have not yet become quite *sapiens*. Nevertheless, present Lakota cosmology now includes this great time depth as a partial rationalization of the creation of Lakota and other American Indian cultural groups.

Following the same abstraction, *social* is indicated by the horizontal which symbolizes a peoples empirical interaction with other peoples, both inter- and intraculturally. Hypothetically, we may posit a time in which people interacted with clear-cut and discrete cultural units - their own and their neighbours - with little thought or threat of extinction. I realize that some may question whether or not warfare between tribes may not constitute a threat of extinction. I would immediately answer that before Euroamerican contact, as far as I can gather from my own research, tribes may indeed have warred against each other, but their ideology did not include a doomsday plan by which one's tribal group would be annihilated by another. Rather, most Indians, if they feared extinction at all, reserved the deed for their gods and not their enemies. It is not until we find encroachment by

whites that we find some formulation of a fear that the white man will conquer the Indian universe.¹²

Importantly, then, this *social* horizontal line must take into consideration Euroamericans among others with whom Indians interact. My contention is twofold: the greater the threat of cultural discontinuity, the greater the depth of the cultural line; the greater the threat of social absorption, the greater the need to discriminate between cultures particularly by using means and methods that would underscore the distinctiveness between Indians and whites (given that similarity between cultures is the real threat).

As one of those means or methods of circumscribing Lakota culture, one may readily see cultural exaggeration as a major preoccupation. Cultural exaggeration is acted out, and in fact, it must be demonstrable to prove and underscore its own point. A culture devoid of visible and viable ritual behavior is in this abstraction in danger of becoming subsumed by the majority. Once aspects of cultural exaggeration have been introduced, some form of rationalization must be established, and this is where relativistic cosmology plays an important part.

Before discussing this important part that cosmology plays in the reinvention of culture, let me quickly add that in the Lakota need to redefine itself vis-a-vis the white man, religion has become the major distinguishing feature, and Oglala religion in fact is synonymous with Lakota ethnic identity (Powers, 1977). Although I still believe that this position is tenable, I have recently become disenchanted with the term, "ethnic identity", and its counterpart "ethnicity" because the terms, both of which are distinct in theory but confusing in practice, have become applicable to a wide range of behaviour that at one time were called "racial." It is as if when the general public decreed along with scientists that race was no longer useful as a descriptive or analytical term, there was a great surge to replace this tired and useless nomenclature with the term *ethnic*. At least in the American press, ethnic has become a standard referent for the same people once discriminated against along racial lines, nowadays with less sense of guilt.

So I have substituted the terms social and cultural identity, equally old but less biased, and use them in the same manner that I originally employed the terms ethnic identity and ethnicity. In this new nomenclature, social identity is synonymous with ethnic identity, while cultural identity is synonymous with ethnicity.

Once we have this rather complicated grid of interaction clearly envisioned in our minds, what we see is that individuals, as part of what they perceive to be culturally-distinct groups, are located at the intersections of these social and cultural axes as I have defined them. The individuals and groups in fact become a product, and contribute to, the ideology that is a

result of this point of intersection. If we follow the great reasoning of Ferdinand de Saussure, we would have to accept that each of the axes contains an aspect of the other; diachrony, the vertical line, is partly defined in terms of synchrony, the horizontal line, and the reverse is true.

If we turn for a moment to the ordinary definition of cosmology, in most general terms it is simply that branch of metaphysics that deals with the universe as an orderly system. Cosmogony, which equally applies here, deals with the creation of this universe. I see a great deal of utility in viewing cosmological concepts as a relative system of beliefs and rituals, which are concerned with explaining not only the origins of the universe in culturally-differentiated terms, but in explaining the relationships between cause and effect. Perhaps more significantly I should say between effect and cause, because in my way of thinking it is the everyday exigencies (that is, the effect) which are of paramount importance to people, and only secondarily their causes. I would then argue that cosmology is more profitably analyzed when viewed as a dialectic between experience and the need to rationalize that experience and the perceived supraempirical or metaphysical causality believed to account for such experience. The mechanism of cultural reinvention is oral tradition. Although there is belief that oral tradition is an accurate means of transmitting information of cultural relevance over generations, it defies logic to assume that, compared with a writing system, oral tradition is anything but a secondary means of information transmission. It goes without saying that people without writing systems are quite capable of transmitting information orally with a required degree of accuracy, and that oral tradition itself provides the means of correcting any error in its own system.

We have spent a great deal of time studying various forms of oral tradition, but the prevailing form is of course mythology. Without referring to the great corpus of material available on the nature of mythology such as that presented among others by Boas, Campbell, Hocart and Lévi-Strauss, mythology is of course not the only kind of oral tradition that provides information to peoples with or without a writing system. As a matter of fact, it might be concluded that mythology, comparatively speaking, is a rather clear-cut form of oral tradition because mythology is structured in a particular way for the purpose of *retelling*. Presumably this process of retelling, despite the accuracy or inaccuracy of the message, is partly structured in such a way as to guarantee that what is important is the repetition of the presumed, fixed content of myth, rather than the content itself. Hence, I agree with Lévi-Strauss's statement, frequently believed to be cryptic, that there is no singular way to analyze a myth, and each mythographer may in fact interpret the myth differently, or more precisely, one mythographic in-

terpretation is elegant only to the extent that it establishes a need for still another interpretation. I would then also have to agree that it is the process, the repetition, the method, the performance, and retelling of the myth that is seen to be the cosmological matrix of truth. But as Lévi-Strauss has warned..."in science, there are no final truths" (1970:7). But one might also consider that in cosmology, people find and rationalize what they perceive to be truth at precisely the point at which we find a dialectical tension at the conjunction of effect and cause.

But as I have stated, at the basis of cultural invention lies this rather frivolous, deceptive mechanism called oral tradition. And what I mean by this is that if we begin to regard cultural facts other than the mythologies that we expect to be handed down one generation to the next, then we are forced to examine what we might call the short-term rationale that is uttered somewhat expediently to rationalize a cultural *fact* that has been invented for the first time and which has no other long-term rationale emanating from, say, the grandfathers to whose sagacity and perspicacity traditional information is most likely to be attributed.

Now as for the Lakota, even if we just consider the Indians now residing in South Dakota, reading and writing in English and Lakota have been taught by federal schools and missionaries for over 100 years. Lakotas are literate people, and as may be expected, some are exceptionally gifted writers. But the need to express traditional Lakota ideas has always been reserved for the oral tradition rather than a literal tradition. When there is a desire to write about Lakota in the local colleges, or high schools where Lakota texts are still produced, the preferred subject of literacy remains mythology, rather than "history" as we would contrast it.

In fact, despite literacy, there is a common belief among Lakotas and other Indians, and I think this belief holds for some scholars studying these cultures, that the oral tradition has more integrity than the written tradition. Therefore, in recent court battles over land claims and sovereignty and other issues important to the Lakotas, oral tradition, which was originally denied as an acceptable form of testimony, has been reinvoked by Lakotas as the only means of establishing cultural identity for Lakotas, one perceived to be radically different from that of whites, is by assigning one mode of informational transmission, oral tradition, to themselves, while the mode of written history is reserved for whites.

I should admit right at the beginning that I do not believe that there are necessarily any inherent reasons why history is superior to oral tradition. History, too, is a likely candidate for reinvention. Not too long ago I was involved in providing basic information on the Ghost dance to a Senator who represented the Lakotas against an attempt by the Pentagon to write

revisionist history about just who started the battles that ended in a massacre. To be fair, revisionist history may be treated as a form of cultural reinvention, and as far as the U.S. Government is concerned, contrary to historic testimony and oral tradition, the Lakotas started the battle.

I might add there is a relationship between oral tradition and written history which is totally arbitrary. The choice of one or the other as a means of rationalizing tradition is also relative, not absolute. In some cases, oral tradition may be superior to written history, as in the establishment of geographic boundaries in land cases. On the other hand, written history may be superior to oral tradition. An example that comes to mind is the meaning of the term *Wakantanka*. Conveniently, scholars and missionaries, and American Indians who have learned from both, translate the term as Great Spirit or Great Mystery, and it is unlikely that it shall ever be regarded in any other way. Now as far back as 1869 Stephen Return Riggs, himself a missionary, wrote in *Tah-koo Wah-kan* that according to the *oral tradition* of the day:

This god is properly named last and least among their divinities. In no sense is he held in high reverence, which white man have supposed. No worship is offered to him, nor is he named except in the presence of white man, and then not as often as the interpreters indicate. For their appeal is generally to Ta-koo-wakan, and not to the Wa-kan-tanka (Riggs, 1869:71-72).

Furthermore Riggs goes on to state that *Wakantanka* is more appropriately a recent creation to fill up their list of divinities. And in accordance with their own (Dakota) theory, every man and race are under the guardianship of their own particular gods. He continues:

What is more natural than that they should give expression to the corresponding greatness of the white man's god, in comparison with their own *wakan*, by calling him the *Great Wakan*? (*Ibid.*: 73)

And finally, "he is simply the white man's god, and they find no better way to name him" (*Ibid.*:74).

For some reason Riggs' insights have never been applied to the relationship between *Wakantanka* and Great Spirit. This is a case point in which Riggs' written statement about what can certainly be regarded as a case of cultural reinvention was simply overlooked, and in its place a Lakota belief handed down through the oral tradition. *Wakantanka* is a term of great antiquity. In the 20th century, with a new-found interest for many younger people in Lakota religion, we find that *Wakantanka* is considered foremost

as a "Great Mystery," and a cosmology has been reinvented to rationalize it. However, many of these young people do not speak Lakota, and did not learn about their cultural past through the sage words of the grandfathers. They have read them in books as have their fathers and grandfathers, and much of what they know about their cosmology has been established and written down by missionaries and anthropologists. The missionaries taught their great grandfathers that God is like Wakantanka, while the great grandchildren, forced to learn by analogy, are taught that Wakantanka is like God, a theme which I have discussed elsewhere (Powers, 1986b:105-106).

In short, neither written history nor oral tradition should have been seen as having anything but politically strategic connotations. Rather, where the two cultures meet, Indian and white, written history and oral tradition serve as mechanisms for defining social relations; written history is for whites, oral tradition is for Indians.

Because of strained relations between the two groups, and a contemporary climate that finally allows Indians to fight back in philosophical ways, certain Euroamerican economic, political, and religious points of view have been rationalized according to what are perceived to be Lakota tradition. What I am speaking about now is bald, cultural reinvention, and why I think that this topic is important to study and analyze is because cultural reinvention represents point zero on the mythological, and in some cases, cosmological scale. Being able to witness culture being reinvented allows us to understand something about the nature of culture, and particularly the nature of reasoning which in the past we have been unable to broach. Mythology and cosmology always have been rooted so far back in the "primitive" past that we have been unable to crack its code, understand its origin, trace its development, at least not on empirical grounds.

Finally, we may ask, is this not the way all cultures work? Are not all cultures dependent on a relativistic cosmology which allows them to rationalize things that are important to their survival, as they meet each of these exigencies anew? And what better way to rationalize their culture than to believe that these cosmological justifications are absolute - though we know better - because they are god given and because that is the nature of cosmology. That is also the nature of invention and reinvention, and that is the nature of the *communitas* we witness among all peoples of the world, no matter how we define culture, or how it defines itself.

Ho mitak' oyas" in.

NOTES

1. References to Malinowski's use of "charter" may be found scattered through a collection of essays (Malinowski, 1960). His best known definition stated that..."charter above all, is a piece of customary law. backed up by *retrospective* mythological elements in tradition" (p. 111, my emphasis).
2. Here I do not wish to impose prior philosophical meanings to the terms *absolute* and *relative*. By absolute, I mean a condition of a myth which is perceived to be authoritative but unchangeable. By relative, I mean a condition of myth which allows for authoritative elasticity change, particularly in the face of relevant cultural change.
3. Cf. Powers (1986a).
4. Leach breaks with Durkheim and Malinowski by considering that myth and ritual always imply each other. The full argument may be found in Leach (1954:8-16).
5. Particularly in Powers (1977, 1982, 1986a and 1986b).
6. This idea is of course a metaphorical reference to Dawkins (1976).
7. My position is that "pan-Indianism" is simply a terminological transformation of "acculturation" and "assimilation" both of which are artifacts of so-called neo-evolutionary theory *a la* Leslie White, combined with Boasian diffusionism. As such, "pan-Indianism" raises a number of methodological problems which I treat in a forthcoming book.
8. As exemplified the mythopoetic novel, *Black Elk Speaks*, by John G. Neihardt (1932) and the countless epigonic treatises that have followed.
9. Cf. Lévi-Strauss (1966) particularly Chapter One. My use of the term *deconstruction* follows Lévi-Strauss's description of *bricolage* rather than the use of the term by Derrida, although perhaps Derrida might agree with my general principle that the dynamics of myth can be formalized using the formula *deconstruction > reconstruction > construction*, which of course is simply another way of looking at dialectical relationships.
10. An elaboration of this may be found in Powers (1977 and 1986b).
11. A real threat notwithstanding, Lakota believe that the "souls" of whites go to the separate place after death located somewhere over Europe.

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