**Nora Sullivan and Amelia Eckles**

**Class Reflections on Responses to Suffering in Lakota Traditions**

The objective of the unit on Lakota traditions in the Comparative Religions class was to examine the Lakota Ghost Dance as a possible “religious response to suffering.” We found that the Lakota people suffered immensely by being forced out of their sacred land in the Black Hills, robbed of their cultural heritages by American Europeans, and massacred in the Battle at Wounded Knee. Suffering also occurred through the introduction of diseases, extinction of buffalo, and breaking of treaties (specifically the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868.)

The Lakota responded to this suffering through various forms of resistance, in particular the Ghost Dance (1) that was inspired by the prophet Wovoka. In the midst of great suffering, the Lakota sought out spirituality and rituals that were intended to reconnect them to nature and restore balance to the Earth, as means to cope with their deplorable circumstances. They continued dancing for some time, in direct opposition to orders to stop. This dancing led the white men to believe that the Lakota were unpredictable and dangerous; ultimately this led to the December 1890 massacre of Wounded Knee, in which hundreds of Lakota men, women, and children were slaughtered by the United States 7th Cavalry.

The Ghost Dance exemplifies the Native American instinct to respond to suffering through dance. Michelene Pesantubbee referred to several ways in which Native Americans have found solace through ritualistic movement. Additionally, in many instances Lakota will intentionally seek out suffering in order to commune with Mother Earth and become aware of the joy and despair inherent in life. For example, participants of the Sun Dance experience suffering through the piercing and ripping of their chests, which symbolizes the tearing of flesh that occurs while bringing new life into the world.

These encounters with suffering, among others, have influenced more recent examples of resistance, many of which were enacted by members of the American Indian Movement, or AIM. In 1973 Russell Means led a group of Native Americans to occupy Wounded Knee (2) in order to illuminate their demands to reopen negotiations on treaties with the American government, as well as remove the unpopular Lakota tribal president, Richard Wilson. Means and his peers re-enacted the Ghost Dance, led by Lakota medicine man Leonard Crow Dog, in an attempt to respond to their history of mistreatment and neglect. Over the next four decades, resistance continued in the Big Foot Memorial Ride (2), the re-burial of Zintkala Nuni (4), and countless other instances. (See list at bottom of page)

Lakota responses to suffering vary from overtly religious to seemingly militaristic. But we argue that a religious element is consistently present, and that it is simply manifested in a variety of ways.

**Works Cited**

(1) Ghost Dance: <http://www.native-americans-online.com/native-american-ghost-dance.html>

(2) Wounded Knee: <http://siouxme.com/lodge/aim_73.html>

(3) Big Foot Memorial Ride: <http://www.lakotacountrytimes.com/news/2010-01-05/Front_Page/Big_Foot_Memorial_Ride_23_years.html>

(4) Re-burial of Zintkala Nuni: <http://www.sdpb.org/Lostbird/summary.asp>

**Additional Examples of Resistance**

Alcatraz Occupation: <http://siouxme.com/lodge/alcatraz_np.html>

Refusal to Make Wounded Knee a National Monument: <http://www.dickshovel.com/WKc.html>

**Works Consulted**

Record, Ian. “A Fire That Burns: The Legacy of Wounded Knee 1973.” *Native Americas Magazine*. Spring 1998 edition.

Pesantubbee, Michelene. “Wounded Knee: Site of Resistance and Recovery.” In *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*. Eds. Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres. Indiana University Press, 2006.

Mooney, James. *The Ghost-dance Religion and Wounded Knee.* Dover Publications, 1973.