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Lakota Responses to Suffering

The suffering of Native Americans at the hands of whites was very prevalent in early America, yet has rarely been acknowledged or discussed. In studying the Lakota tribe, the crippling effect that white settlers had on Native Americans and their way of life was incredibly problematic, and the Lakota were left searching for ways to restore and preserve their culture. Through the Ghost Dance of the nineteenth century, and the reburial of Zintkala Nuni in the twentieth century, the resilient Lakota people banded together to replace their suffering with feelings of hope, restored community and a revival of their way of life.

The Lakota are known as the “Western Sioux”, occupying the areas of “Montana, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, and Nebraska”, and are traditionally seen as “nomadic people who organize their lives and ceremonies around the movement of the sun and stars” (Powers, Garrett and Martin 5295). Instead of viewing the ceremonies and traditions of the Lakota through the western lens of “religion”, “For the Lakota, religion is not compartmentalized into a separate category”, it is engrained into all areas of life (Powers, Garrett and Martin 5295). The Lakota’s relationship with their land, especially the Black Hills, which is considered sacred, is an extremely strong part of their culture, and is the center of many rites, rituals and traditions (Powers, Garrett and Martin 5295). Lakota people see the land they live on as “a gift from the sacred powers”, and “understand themselves to be a part of the landscape with obligations to the land” (Pesantubbee 86). As Pesantubbee states, “If the Lakota alienate themselves from the land and scared powers, they lose an integral part of what makes them distinctly Lakota” (86). This strong relationship between the Lakota people and the land and nature which surrounds them is crucial in understanding the suffering that they went through in the nineteenth century and why they desperately sought ways to heal their pain.

In the nineteenth century, the Lakota were faced with a lot of hardships that led to an overall loss of hope and resilience amongst the people. There were several natural causes for their distress including crop failure, loss of buffalo, and disease, but the actions of the government and the white settlers brought on even more suffering to the Lakota (Mooney 829-831). Broken treaties and promises, the reduction of rations, rapid advances in “civilization” and seizure of land made the Lakota experience an overwhelming threat to their land and way of life, which brought them to their breaking point (Mooney 829-831).

Amongst all of the chaos, a Lakota man named Wovoka had an encounter with God, who offered a solution for the Lakota’s problems (Mooney 771). Wovoka was told how the Lakota people should behave and was given a dance to bring back to his people, with instructions on how and when to perform it (Mooney 772). God told Wovoka that if the people followed his instructions and performed this “Ghost Dance” in the intervals that he described, that they would be rewarded: “a major catastrophe would annihilate all whites in the spring of 1891…[and] at the same time, the spirits of deceased Lakota relatives and herds of buffalo and horses would return to populate the earth” allowing the Lakota “to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease and misery” (Pesantubbee 77; Mooney 777). Wovoka brought this message and the Ghost Dance back to the Lakota, and upon hearing the solution for all of their suffering, the Lakota committed themselves to Wovoka’s words, and performance of the Ghost Dance became widespread. The dance brought a sense of community solidarity to the Lakota people as hundreds danced together in large circle, “[joining] hands and [performing] a series of side steps of shuffling movements while changing five songs that were given to Wovoka in a visionary state”; they performed the dance for five days, every three months (Carroll and Stoffle 338). The dance seemed to be the solution to all of their problems. Not only would the natural causes of their suffering be resolved, but the whites, who further exacerbated their troubles, would be gone for good leaving the Lakota to return to their land and their true way of life. The Ghost Dance was the solution that they were looking for to fix all of their problems and they were willing to trust Wovoka’s vision and partake in the Ghost Dance to bring back happiness back to the Lakota.

Despite the promise that the Ghost Dance would bring peace and happiness to the Lakota people, the opposite occurred, and more suffering was the result. Upon discovering the dancing that the Lakota were doing, “local whites including agents and teachers misrepresented the dance to the public with alarming descriptions of devilish practices” (Pesantubbee 77). Apparently feeling threatened, they “exacerbated the situation by spreading rumors of war dancing, gun stockpiling, and a planned uprising by Lakota”, which was all completely untrue (Pesantubbee 77). In response to the accusations against them, some Lakota began to dance continually, while others fled; tragically, neither response satisfied the whites enough to prevent the massacre at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890 (Pesantubbee 77). While the Ghost Dance began as a response to the suffering of the Lakota, it ended up only bringing more suffering to its people. “When the spirit dancers were massacred at Wounded Knee, the hopes of the Lakota for a return to the old ways were dashed…As a result, the disillusioned Lakota suffered many generations of depression, despair, and social problems” (Pesantubbee 79).

After dealing with the fallout from the massacre at Wounded Knee for many decades, “the event that had demoralized the Lakota later motivated them and other native people to struggle against suppression of their right to self-determination as sovereign people” in the twentieth century (Pesantubbee 79). One response to the suffering brought to the Lakota at Wounded Knee was “the return of the body of one of the survivors of the massacre who had been taken away from the Lakota people”, an infant by the name of Zintkala Nuni (Pesantubbee 79). After her mother died in the Wounded Knee massacre, Zintkala Nuni was taken from the Lakota through deceit and bribery and was adopted by the commander of the Nebraska National Guard (Pesantubbee 81). Because Nuni was completely removed from her Lakota culture, when she tried to return to find out where she was from, “She did not know the language and did not understand the culture, and because of her alien behavior, the Lakota did not accept her”; she died never understanding her true identity (Pesantubbee 81-82). “Zintkala Nuni became the symbol of thousands of children adopted away from their tribal communities…a form of cultural genocide” (Pesantubbee 82). Nuni’s experience with being taken from her culture also serves as a parallel to the way that many Lakota were feeling due to the encroachment of white civilization onto their lands. They felt that their entire way of life was being threatened and feared losing their culture as Nuni did.

The Lakota’s reburial of Zintkala Nuni was important not only for Nuni as an individual, but for the Lakota people as a whole. “Instead of viewing the massacre as the end of Lakota culture, they had to make it part of their cycle of life and death by fulfilling their proper burial customs”, and used the reburial of Zintkala Nuni as a way to “recast the symbol of death into one of renewal” (Pesantubbee 81). In bringing Nuni’s body back to Wounded Knee amongst the Lakota people where she belonged, they were able to both release the symbol of white domination that took her away, and was still felt by many after Wounded Knee, and fulfill their Lakota burial ceremonial responsibilities (Pesantubbee 82). The Lakota burial ceremonies are important for several reasons. First, the Lakota believe that a spirit cannot travel the “Spirit Road” and reconnect with the spirits of the deceased without a proper burial ceremony; the completion of a burial ceremony allows their spirit to complete the cycle of life (Pesantubbee 82). Burial ceremonies are also important because they serve as a way for the relatives to “grieve and recover from their loss” (Pesantubbee 82). After the massacre at Wounded Knee, hundreds of victims were dumped in a mass grave, not getting the customary burial ceremony, and providing the opportunity for the Lakota people to properly grieve over their lost. Zintkala Nuni’s reburial stood as a symbol for all those who died at Wounded Knee and were denied these rites. Reburying Nuni at Wounded Knee not only “helped her spirit to become part of the cycle of life again”, but “Just as the spirit dance was about reuniting the Lakota people with the spirits of their deceased relatives, so, too was the burial of Zintkala Nuni at the Wounded Knee gravesite” (Pesantubbee 82). This symbolic reburial of the Lakota lost at Wounded Knee through Zintkala Nuni helped them to grieve the death and destruction at Wounded Knee and to move on; it led to the “restoration of Lakota relationships to the spirits of the land and the ancestors”, which are key aspects of the Lakota culture and way of life (Pesantubbee 82).

Although the suffering of the Lakota during the nineteenth century, mainly at the hands of the white man, was terrible and demoralizing, the Lakota were not willing to surrender their lives so easily. Through the Ghost Dance and the reburial of Zintkala Nuni, the Lakota showed their unwavering strength and determination in preserving their culture and bringing happiness back to their people.

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