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Comparative Religion

Essay #2

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*Inktomi*, *Heyokas*, and Split Faces: Didactic Suffering in Lakota Communities

Stories about *Inktomi*, the Lakota trickster-god, are typically playful in their depiction of the trickster and his various, often impulsive and sexually devious, exploits. *Inktomi* pursues young virgins, shames the other gods, and contrives artful (and, at times, absurd) deceptions. He is portrayed as a figure both “ridiculous and empowering, a foolish butt of jokes and a self-injuring buffoon … making people laugh at his misadventures,” (Kroeber 20-21). This perception of *Inktomi* coincides well with a Jungian reading of the trickster figure as one whose historical presence and cross-cultural predominance suggest an “undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level,” (Jung 165). Traditionally, the trickster would emerge as a character of catharsis, a way for communities to indirectly experience a release from moral constrictions as they listen to stories of the depraved god. Were this the whole of *Inktomi’s* story, his role would be one-sided and he could easily be placed within the traditional trickster archetype. However, in some retellings of Lakota myth, such as the James Walker recording of “When the People Laughed at the Moon,” *Inktomi* is also the figure responsible for the creation of the sun and the moon— he deceives both men and gods and, in an act of vengeance, curses the world to a fate of endless mockery.

My shape is queer and all regard me as a clown … Now I shall laugh and I shall cause all to be laughed at, and by my power as a God, I will spare none. I have brought shame on the chief of the Gods and the chief of the people, on the most beautiful of the Gods and the most beautiful of women and the people have laughed at them. Let all who have laughed at me beware, for I will cause them to be laughed at," (55-56).

Like the “Double Face Woman” (*Ite*) whose beauty is only half destroyed as punishment for shaming *Hanhepi Wi*, *Inktomi* represents two paradoxical identities— he is a harbinger of vengeance, suffering, and cruel mockery as well as a humorous, cathartic fool. Nowhere is this paradoxical nature more present than in the Lakota identification of *heyoka* or sacred clowns whose roles within their communities seem to tread the border between the comedic and sacrificial.

Within Lakota communities, *heyokas* serve as contraries to typical / accepted behaviors. They wear torn clothes, sometimes turned inside-out; shiver and complain of being cold in the most unbearable summer heat; shed clothing in the winter; and ride their horses (or, more often, donkeys) backwards. They say ‘yes’ when they mean ‘no,’ (Janik 247). This behavior is necessary in order to protect themselves and their community from lightening, a force which, in many cultures, including the Lakota, signifies paradoxical understandings of power.[[1]](#footnote-1) In a sense, their roles are at once sacred and comedic. Through their contrary behaviors, they allow their community a therapeutic release from more serious events (in the time of western expansion, *heyokas* frequently impersonated the white settlers as a way of alleviating, if only briefly, the suffering of their people) but their actions also serve to warn of potentially dangerous behaviors and to shed light on the truth.

These contrary actions had the effect of producing laughter among their people. "In the process of getting a good laugh at the backwards-forwards, cold-hot contraries, the people were opened to immediate experience'' (Tedlock and Tedlock 106). When *heyokas* performed in very solemn religious ceremonies, their antics caused the people to laugh at medicine men or holy men. This might appear to have weakened the cohesiveness of Sioux religion or community, but the opposite is true. *Heyoka* practices revitalized the people by showing them higher truths (Tedlock and Tedlock 109). (Janik 247)

Like the, two-sided nature of the trickster *Inktomi*, the *heyokas* are expected to lead lives of duality, existing as both the abnormal ‘other’ and the necessary sacrifice – the individual who brings clarity and truth to the rest of the community through a life of contraries. Black Elk, who was himself called upon to become a *heyoka* and who participated in *heyoka* ceremonies, attempts to describe the importance of the *heyokas* to Lakota communities, “You have noticed that the truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face,” (Neihardt 149).

The majority of literature on *heyokas* and *Inktomi* does not draw direct connections between the two. *Inktomi* is a trickster, a god who visits both his fellow gods and men only to lead them to paths of immorality and shame, then laugh at the results. *Heyokas* are sacred individuals whose contrary and often comical behavior is seen as necessary to the health of the communities in which they live. *Heyokas* receive their visions from the thunderbird, the thunder god, or sometimes, just *Thunder*. While some myths may reference both as if there exists some hierarchy of power: "The Thunderbird is your enemy … *Waziya* and *Inktomi* are its friends and *Heyoka* and *Iya* will do its bidding. It will plague you with these evil ones" (Walker 126), *Inktomi* is never directly responsible for the visions of the *heyokas* nor is he present in their ceremonies. However, there are parallels which can be drawn between both *Inktomi* and the *heyoka’s* roles within Lakota communities. In the previously mentioned myth, “When the People Laughed at the Moon,” *Inktomi* enacts vengeance due to what he has perceived as poor treatment and a lack of recognition, “But because I was born of *Wakinyan*, the God who has no shape, my shape is queer and all regard me as a clown. What I do to please others is made a sport. I am weary of being the sport of the Gods and of mankind,” (Walker 55). *Inktomi* calls himself a clown, mourns his life of isolation and mockery, then condemns the rest of the world to face a similar fate. The lines can be read as a description of the *heyoka’s* role in the community— *heyokas* must remove themselves from society, must make a mockery of traditional behaviors, must be subject to the ridicule of the community they serve. “’The *heyoka* was often a lonely person— avoided and ridiculed by other people.’ (Hassrick 272). A *heyoka* used his power to save his people from death at the hands of the Thunder-beings, yet he received nothing in return save ridicule,” (Janik 248). In a way, the *heyoka* became theliving embodiment of *Inktomi’s* curse for they must suffer his isolation and censure in order to ensure the safety and well-being of their communities (dangers, which are represented by both lightening and amoral behavior).

What seem most pertinent, particularly for the use of this class, is how the discussion of *Inktomi* and *heyokas* allows for specific interpretations of responses to suffering within Lakota traditions. Returning to the aforementioned Black Elk quotation, the reader will notice the degree to which suffering and laughter/joy are intertwined— they are two sides of the “same face,” both necessary in order to achieve / perceive truth. In this manner, the *heyoka* represent the importance / natural existence of suffering to the Lakota people. Suffering and its other half, laughter, are always present and always necessary. Perceiving truth becomes impossible without both sides and those individuals who sacrifice their lives[[2]](#footnote-2) to provide both must themselves suffer in their isolation and through the ridicule of their communities.

In modern times, there are few traditional *heyokas* remaining. With the loss of tribal lands and the inability to practice ceremonies, the role of *heyokas* has adapted and, to some extent, diminished. One account of a 1952 pow-wow describes a female *heyoka* who “dressed in high heels and a short dress and mocked the behavior of white women,” (Howard 257). While perhaps not the ceremony of suffering and comedy of the past, the behavior of modern *heyoka* still exists as a response to suffering— in this case, oppression and forced acculturation by the white community. The sentiment expressed by *Inktomi,* to “Let all who have laughed at me beware, for I will cause them to be laughed at,” the idea of *heyoka* as simultaneously sacrificial (in the individual’s suffering/isolation) and cathartic (for their community) continues to influence and aid Lakota communities.

Works Cited

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1. Perhaps, it is worth noting that within many myths (South and North American, Chinese, Egyptian, to name a few) excepting those which might be classified as Western, lightning is frequently attributed to a trickster-like god who is simultaneously terrible, deviant, and powerful. In Russian, *Ivan Grozny* (Ivan the Thunderous) has been translated as Ivan the Terrible— the resultant western connotations, while ultimately valid, were, nonetheless unintended in the original title. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Unlike some fools / clowns in other religious traditions, Lakota *heyokas* had to live their lives as sacred clowns. They did not dawn this identity solely for the purpose of specific events or ceremonies. They had to talk and act as contraries as long as they were called to be *heyoka*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)