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**LEGACY OF THE WINDS:  
THE RELIGIOUS METAMORPHOSIS OF THE OGLALA SIOUX**

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- I. Introduction : Who are the Oglala?
- II. The epic of Black Elk
  - A. Provision of authorship
    - 1. Circumstances of writing the epic
    - 2. The role of John G. Neihardt
    - 3. Significance of the work
  - B. The Great Vision
  - C. The enduring effects of Black Elk
- III. Pre-historical Oglala Religion
  - A. Myths
    - 1. Cosmological
    - 2. Heroic Ancestral
    - 3. Ceremonial
  - B. Origin of the Pipe
- IV. Historically Documented Oglala Religion
  - A. The Sun Dance
  - B. The Ghost Dance
  - C. Wounded Knee Massacre
- V. Conclusion : The Religious Identity of A Changing Group

## **Introduction : Who exactly are the Oglala?**

At the time when the Anglo-Saxon immigrants and settlers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century began their sluggish march westward, the relative geographical abodes of the native American Indian tribes were admittedly quite different than they had been a century earlier, during the era of Spanish conquest and colonial expansion.<sup>1</sup> The Iroquois League of Five Nations was not yet ratified at this time, and most of the native tribes were busy roaming the forests and plains of the South, not the Midwest that is today commonly thought of as “the land of Indians.” The name “Oglala” would probably be met with confused stares if mentioned in a typical crowd of average U.S. citizens, but virtually every schoolboy and schoolgirl would at least recognize the names of Sitting Bull and George Custer. The tribes that comprised the Sioux were not always of the same blood, and during the 1670s, the area inhabited by the seven groups who have come to be known as Sioux extended from such extremes as from Saskatchewan to Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> Much controversy has arisen concerning the names used to describe the tribes, even among native groups. Traditionally, the three major divisions of the Sioux “race” were referenced by the individual languages they spoke: Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota. This came to be a problem in documenting the tribes, because some smaller tribes spoke several of these languages, and others. The further designations Teton, Yankton, and Santee were made in reference to the locations that these groups generally resided, but this as well was enigmatic, since the Sioux were characteristically a

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<sup>1</sup> Powers, William K. *Oglala Religion*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 15-18.

<sup>2</sup> Laubin, Reginald and Gladys Laubin. *Indian Dances of North America: Their Importance to Indian Life, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 50. Also Powers, 28.

semi-nomadic people, and rarely stayed put for long periods of time. The Oglala were the largest band comprising the Teton tribe, speaking Lakota as their primary tongue.<sup>3</sup>

The Oglala were known for their oppressiveness, but also for their charm. Few surrounding bands and other tribes could afford to obstinately oppose the Oglala,<sup>4</sup> and when times of war came, the Oglala were one of the strongest to fill the ranks. The Oglala were the largest of the Teton, one of seven bands of the Sioux, calling themselves the “Seven Fireplaces.”<sup>5</sup> The name is fairly old, and in Lakota means “they scatter their own.”<sup>6</sup> Within the larger picture, the Oglala, who were subdivided even among themselves, were simply a cog in the giant wheel of the plains Indians race that was Sioux. Any week of the year found the bands scattered across the land: a practice which served the dual purpose of providing a military defense perimeter surrounding all the bands, but mostly of maintaining a sizable bison population by curbing the range of the hunting parties. Right in line with the prevailing religious mindset, the main concern of the Oglalan tribesman was the greater need of the Sioux, reflected in this scattering pattern. This inner code of behavior was an important facet of Sioux religion as a whole, and will be addressed further in this systematic examination of the major characteristics of Oglala belief and practice.

### **The Epic of Black Elk**

Perhaps no other single discourse in history has changed the understanding of Native American belief and practice than that which occurred between historian-poet John G. Neihardt and the once medicine man known as Black Elk in a sunny week in early May of 1931. This profound effect not only shaped the vision of the Sioux as appearing to the outside world, but

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<sup>3</sup> Powers, 27-30.

<sup>4</sup> Highwater, Jamake. *Ritual of the Wind: North American Indian Ceremonies, Music, and Dances*. (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 65. Also Neihardt, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Powers, 21-24.

also gave a new sense of identity and purpose to the youth of the day, which endures even today. The life memoirs of the holy man are recorded in the richly flowing compendium *Black Elk Speaks*. The occasion for documenting these words came virtually by chance, as a single poet in search of material for his volumes came into contact with a man who “knew” of his own coming even before he arrived.<sup>7</sup> In the course of his first visit, Neihardt was told of the divine nature of the appointment, that Black Elk felt an intense need to share his life experiences, both religious and mundane in nature.<sup>8</sup> Neihardt eagerly agreed to return and received this grand story in the following year at the appointed time, and the resulting work was published in 1932 as the short narrative *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. As most Sioux doctrine remains unwritten and dependent on the religious ministers of the tribe, this important conversation provided a link from the old culture and ritual with the generation of that day, who had suffered a loss of identity as a result of the social dispersion after the Wounded Knee massacre.

As with most significant works of religion, there was quite a bit of controversy surrounding criticism of the authenticity and sincerity of the book. Some critics maintain that Neihardt apparently ignored the personal conviction of Black Elk, treating his historical narrative rather instead as his religious theology.<sup>9</sup> According to the biographical and other recorded characteristics of Black Elk, he should be considered equally as avid an Oglala historian as he was an Oglala medicine man. Black Elk’s account eventually came to be much more than a simple historical discourse, however, one evidence of this being that “Black Elk is regularly

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>7</sup> Neihardt, John G. and Nicholas Black Elk. *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition (4<sup>th</sup> edition.)* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000)., xxv.

<sup>8</sup> Neihardt and Black Elk, xxvii.

<sup>9</sup> Holler, Clyde. *Black Elk’s Religion: the Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 6.

invoked...in support of political and religious positions...as religious practitioners routinely invoke his authority in support of their own.”<sup>10</sup> The influence of the book admittedly has had greater effects in some regions than others, but without it many groups reflecting a return to the older ways of religious thought would never have arisen in the contemporary milieu of Native American belief. Some have spent time researching the scope of the lasting effects of the book, and have observed that *Black Elk Speaks* “has become a North American bible of all tribes. They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life, now being badly eroded by the same electronic media which are dissolving other American communities.”<sup>11</sup>

The content of the book is both simple and elegant, very much reflecting the poetic tendency of Neihardt. The detail is shockingly intense, extended all the more by Black Elk’s companion who was present at the writing, Standing Bear. The smaller details of culture and material substance (objects, etc.) are creatively interwoven with the sacred and religiously pertinent material, raising the question of whether Black Elk spoke these utterances in the same breath, or were later added in editing by Neihardt, perhaps from earlier meetings. Contrary to the tendency of most major religions, the most significant experience that Black Elk claims to have partaken in occurred not in the prime of his life, say the thirties or forties, but he says took place in a vision that came when he was deathly sick at the age of nine.<sup>12</sup> Before Black Elk begins his Speaking, he first prepares to offer the thanks offering to the Spirit of the World. Much of the symbolism revealed in the sacrament reflects the life-long fervor Black Elk has upheld in response to receiving his special and divinely sent vision. The undefiled Sacred Pipe is brought

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<sup>10</sup> Holler, 3.

<sup>11</sup> By Vine Deloria, jr. taken from *Black Elk Speaks, 21<sup>st</sup> Century ed.*, xv.

<sup>12</sup> Neihardt and Black Elk, 16.

out for use, and filled with dried red willow bark.<sup>13</sup> He pauses for a moment to explain the significance of the pipe, which is of tremendous benefit to the reader. The four ribbons adorning the pipe represent the four quarters of the universe, and are visualized tangibly by the compass directions.<sup>14</sup> The great ominous Thunder Beings, representing the ancestral homage of the tribe, make their home in the western sky, and are represented by the black feather. The white feather is affixed in representation of the White Giant of the North, that is the wind, having at least some authority in the world. The red feather is made to face eastward, and always faces the glow of the rising sun Dawn, bestowing wisdom. Finally the yellow feather is meant to encourage growth, and faces south, where the sun is always shining and there is always enough water to nourish the plant and animal life. The entire offering is directed towards the “One Great Spirit” that is the “Father Eagle,”<sup>15</sup> The thought comes to mind of whether the worship of this Great Spirit constitutes a true monotheism, but this problem will be addressed further in a later section. The vision that Black Elk received when he was nine required a certain level of transcendence, or separation from the earthly world – the corporal, bodily world. History was integral to the vision. In fact, most of the subject matter the spirits were revealing to Black Elk constituted some form of history, be it ancestral veneration<sup>16</sup> or institutional myth.<sup>17</sup>

The theological matter of the book was a bit more cryptic, however, and gave rise to variances of opinion in interpretation<sup>18</sup> (as is the case in most historical religions still observed today.) The office of the medicine man was responsible for various diverse duties, but probably all would agree that the most honored thing any worshiper might receive from a deity, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Neihardt and Black Elk, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> DeMallie, Raymond. *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 47.



most sacred thing that a deity might impart would be a vision. In the book, Black Elk records four such visions, and also comments on many smaller observances and rituals. As noted above, the most important vision in the life of Black Elk was the one that took place when he was nine, and determined the life fate of Black Elk, that he was to deliver the message of the old ways to a new people.<sup>19</sup> The exposition of the “Six Grandfathers” represents the true heart of the Sioux religious persuasion that the universe is made of the spirit deities, the ancestral spirits, the earth itself, the plants, and the animals. Many of these concepts overlap each other, but all together represent the central *monism* that characterizes Native American religion: that is, everything is a part of a greater whole, and thus all is sacred, whether good or evil.

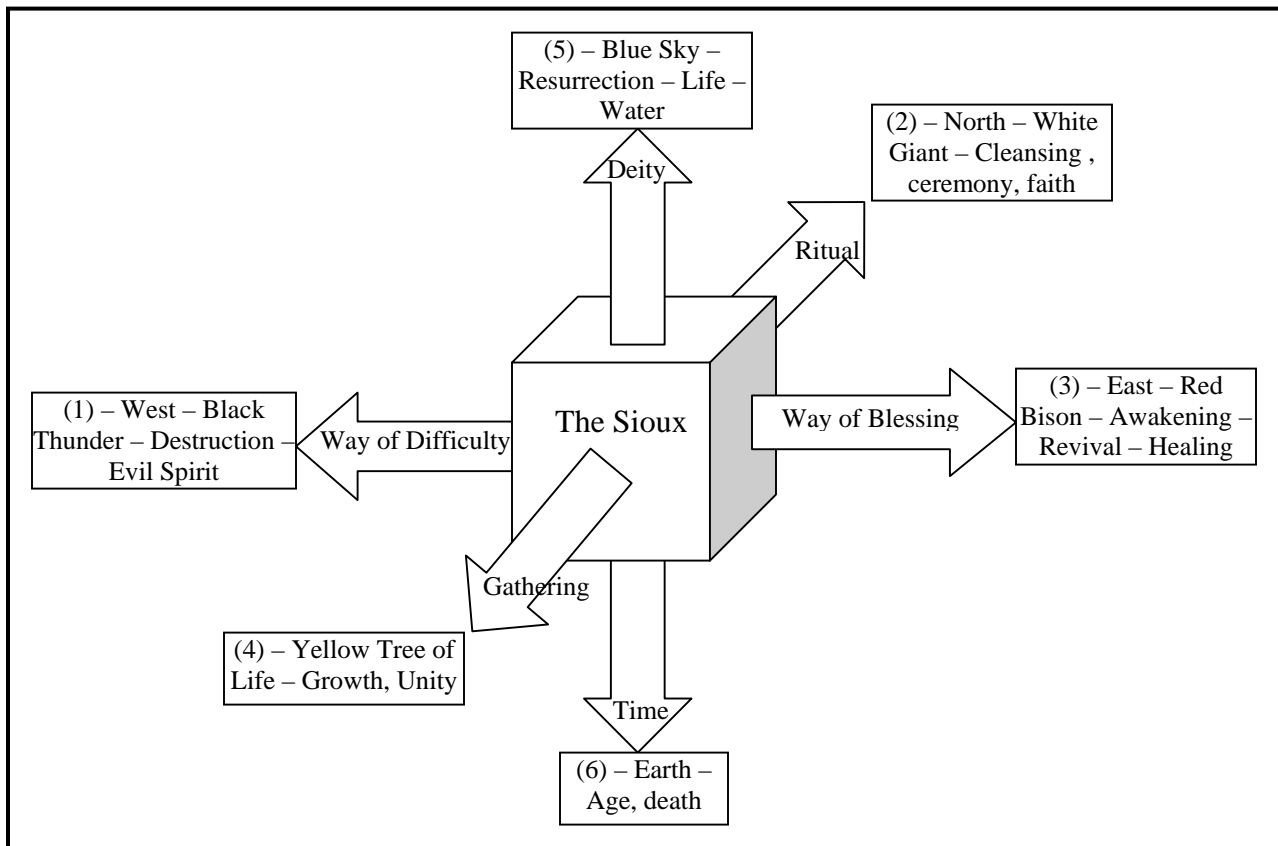
The vision of the Six Grandfathers introduces any reader to the things that Native Americans, the Sioux in particular, hold as most sacred, and typically appear in one form or another in most of the major rituals. The following chart and diagram will best present the nature of the Six Grandfathers, and any practical applications of the concepts.

**Table 1. The Six Grandfathers of Black Elk’s Vision.<sup>20</sup>**

	<b>Cardinal Direction</b>	<b>Names of Deity</b>	<b>Colors</b>	<b>Totem</b>	<b>Significance / Application of Deity</b>
1	West	Thunder Beings	Black, Gray	Storms	Creation account, other mythologies, the power to destroy
2	North	White Giant, Wind	White	Goose	Cleansing, ceremony, faith
3	East	Sun-Always-Shining	Red, Orange	Bison	Awakening, revival, healing
4	South	Sun-Always-Facing	Yellow, Green	Elk	Growth, unity, center of nation, origin of the Tree of Life
5	Sky	-----	Blue	Eagle	Power, invocation of all deities (closely related to the Sun Dance)
6	Earth	-----	-----	-----	Age, familiarity, trial

<sup>19</sup> Neihardt and Black Elk, 35.

Diagram 1. Spatial Orientation and Representation of the Six Grandfathers.



Black Elk considered himself inhuman at the times he received the visions, but human throughout all other times of his life.<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that Black Elk regarded himself a deity, or able the contact a deity of his own will, in fact the perspective of the narrative emanates the feeling that Black Elk was an extremely humble sort of person, never acting rashly or vainly or in exaltation of himself. What most readers are unaware of after reading the epic narrative is that Black Elk was actually a Catholic convert for the remainder of his life. While many have made postulations as to why Black Elk would make such a drastic change, the fact remains: the true

<sup>20</sup> Taken from "The Great Vision", Neihardt and Black Elk, 16-36.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

deep-seated motivations of Black Elk for converting willingly to Catholicism will never be fully understood, although he did once give a terse answer, “My children had to live in this world.”<sup>22</sup> Black Elk was present at many plains battles, at Little Big Horn when Custer “Long-hair” fell, when the great Chief Crazy Horse was murdered, and at the regrettable Wounded Knee massacre, an event marking a symbolic end to the old Sioux ways of life. The full effects of releasing such an account into the hands of ethnic Sioux, other Native Americans, and the rest of the nation still has yet to be realized. One thing is for certain, however, if this book had never been written, many contemporary views on the history of the Sioux and their religion may have been radically different.

### **Pre-Historical Oglala Religion**

Now the focus must turn to the religious beliefs themselves, beginning with a time before the written word recorded the practices of the Sioux. Mythology holds a high place in most ancient religions, and the Sioux base their worship on the ideals upheld by their ancestry as far as memory can serve. Research has yielded four general categories of mythology that have always been present in Sioux folklore.<sup>23</sup> There are: 1) cosmological myths, 2) institutional myths, 3) ritual myths, and 4) tales and entertainment. The myths of the Sioux may superficially appear to be fireside stories that rouse great imaginations, similar to the modern “ghost-story”<sup>24</sup> but this is very likely not the case at all. The myths of the Sioux did not exist for no particular reason; each one had a specific and predestined purpose within the belief system.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> DeMallie, 47.

<sup>23</sup> Hultkrantz, Åke and Christopher Vecsey. *Belief and Worship in Native North America, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Note that many “ghost stories” do indeed come from Native American folk lore, but serve the mere purpose of comedy, instructing children, or simply entertainment. Some have tried to equate the two very different forms of legend seeming to indicate that religious myths originated in the same manner as these jovial stories. This cannot be proven or disproven, but the fervent attitude of the medicine man would seem to indicate that they would not allow the common defamation of such highly sacred and guarded stories.

<sup>25</sup> Hultkrantz and Vecsey, 12.

The Sioux have recorded only a few variations on the myth of Creation, and all of them correlate together and do not truly conflict in their message. These Cosmological myths provide religious thinkers with a solid background in which to plant their faith. As much as has been recorded, the Sioux have always accepted and understood the novel nature of the universe – in other words, that there has always been a single Being responsible for the creation of the world, although there have been disputes on the condition of this Spirit in today’s world. Although often described as a modified monotheism, the Creator Being of the Sioux reflects also something of the qualities of the pantheist religions. The all-powerful deity of *Taku Skanskan* (“The Great Move-er”) may have once perpetuated a certain breed of monotheism, but has long since given way to the more satisfying, yet mysterious, all-encompassing deity that is completely above the need for power – that being the impersonal force of fate a *Taku Wakan*, (“The Great Mysterious”)<sup>26</sup> who ultimately lead to *Wakan Tanka*, the “Great Incomprehensible.”<sup>27</sup> This Creator Being and supreme authority was most likely among the Sioux since the very beginning, much before European contact and thenceforth Christian monotheism.<sup>28</sup> The temporary conclusion of the matter deduces that, “published evidence among anthropological works in favor of primitive monotheism far outweighs evidence against it.”<sup>29</sup> This means simply that it is unlikely the Sioux and most Native American tribes like them worshiped many gods separately, raising some up above others, but rather viewed their worship practices as ultimately honoring the One Great Spirit.

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<sup>26</sup> Holler, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Dooling, D.M. and J.R. Walker. *The Sons of the Wind: The Sacred Stories of the Lakota*. (New York: Parabola Books, 1984), xviii & 3.

<sup>28</sup> Starkloff, Carl F. *The People of the Center: American Indian Religion and Christianity*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

### **The Lakota Sun Dance – (Wiwanyang-Wacipi)**

The Sun Dance was possibly the most significant ceremonial event for the Sioux, as it was for several plains tribes.<sup>30</sup> The Sun Dance existed as an avenue of addressing all of the divine spirits as one body. This was accomplished by directly impressing or pleasing the spirit responsible for communication among the spirits, (Wi akan) who was the sun. Symbolically, the purpose of the ceremony was to supernaturally bless the warriors as they were about to leave for battle, and also to invest power and healing into the sick so that they might recover.<sup>31</sup> Practically, it was a period of self-mutilation with the intended purpose of coercing the Sun Spirit into representing that individual as righteous, loyal, and worthy among all the other deities. The usual time of the ceremony was a period of about two weeks during spring or early summer.<sup>32</sup> It was always held at the time of the month when the moon was fullest, and the ritual portion and trial portion of the ceremony would begin at noon.<sup>33</sup> The Sun Dance of the Oglala was characteristically communal in nature,<sup>34</sup> and spawned a social gathering that corresponded to the emotions of the larger sacred dance. There were named “participants” in the sacrificial element of the dance, and also designated “criers”, who would sing of the greatness of each individual spirit and the sincerity of those who were torturing their bodies. This was all in addition to the simple worshipers who came to watch and to pray for the ensuing event at hand, such as a great impending battle. The use of the sacred pipe was integral to the Oglala Sun Dance, signifying the ritual honoring of the earth, plant life, and animal life as subsistent with humans.<sup>35</sup> Few outsiders were ever allowed to attend a Sun Dance, because of the sacred and grave nature of the

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<sup>30</sup> DeMallie, 82.

<sup>31</sup> Highwater, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>33</sup> Laubin and Laubin, 290.

<sup>34</sup> Holler, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 64

ceremony. What has been recorded is that “seven days of restraint from food,” and “three days of restraint from water” were commonly expected to be observed by the “participants” and the holy persons involved with the ceremony.<sup>36</sup> The sacred abstinence from “eating, drinking, and resting until nature is quite exhausted”<sup>37</sup> was observed by most of the populous, excepting the sick or aged. Those who wished to contribute most to the ceremony, and all the “participants”, would sit in an intense trance-like state of fixed meditation on one thought, concept, or individual. This state was called “hanmdepi.”<sup>38</sup> The participants were cleansed in a sweat lodge, and then their bodies painted to reflect the sullen state they were meant to achieve. Great pieces of bone or buffalo sinew were pierced through a location slightly above the breast, and tied to a rope strung from the highest top of a “sacred tree.”<sup>39</sup> This sacred tree was procured and erected for the sole purpose of the Sun Dance, and served as a center of the ritual motions. The participants would slowly circle the tree and pull outward, applying pressure to the pierced wounds. Many dancers would meditate in this position until sundown or until they passed out from the pain.<sup>40</sup> The Oglala took the occasion of the Sun Dance to be extremely sacred, and an omen as to the outcome of any upcoming battles or other hardships. Gradually the introduction of U.S. controls into the populations of Oglala spread even into the realm of ceremony. The aggressiveness of the race was attributed to these “heathen practices,” and lead to a national government interdiction against the Sun Dance in the early 1880’s.

### **The Ghost Dance**

Tensions abounded and grew in response to the curtailment of traditional religious ritual, but the Oglala responded in the most sensible manner for Sioux – they redirected their valued

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<sup>36</sup> Holler, 64 and Neihardt and Black Elk, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Holler, 43.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>39</sup> Neihardt and Black Elk, 74.

beliefs into less violent outlets in appeasement of the government and military encroachment. After all, the U.S. was a profitable trading partner and affable neighbor; there was no need to jeopardize such a symbiotic relationship. The introduction of the Ghost Dance phenomenon was largely the brainchild of a crazed prophet from Colorado who had once been a Paiute medicine man, turned to the hopeful gospel of Catholicism, and subsequently formed his own cult pertaining to a prophecy warning against a perilous end of the world. His name was Wovoka.<sup>41</sup> The main thrust of the Ghost Dance movement was displaying peaceable discontent at the insulting interference of the government agency. The view was shared by virtually all the plains tribes, so it is not incredibly surprising that the Ghost Dance religion spread such like a wild prairie fire from the Midwest right to the Oglala. Sparse but well-attended gatherings were spread among the followers by underground networks, and each time the U.S. cavalry was sent to “prevent a violent uprising” despite the fact that Wovoka himself expressly forbade the carrying of weapons on the grounds.<sup>42</sup> The most noted and intriguing facet of the movement was the unhindered faith in what believers referred to as “ghost shirts.”<sup>43</sup> Ever the while seeking to refute every aspect of the infringing white man’s culture, some tribes, including the Oglala, began to cease their trading of textiles with the settlers. Instead, they would produce large quantities of plain white linen shirts and decorate them in the traditional style. Upon finishing a new shirt it was pronounced “holy”, and was said to protect the wearer from the malevolent bullets fired from the guns of the rampaging soldiers. The gatherings themselves would lack any organization, with nothing but a giant rotating circle of partakers dancing until they received the enlightenment of the spirits. In many instances entire circles of a hundred believers or more

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Laubin.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Mooney, James. *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890.* (1<sup>st</sup> Phoenix ed.)

would simultaneously fall into fits of seizure and afterward claim a new divine insight.<sup>44</sup> The elders of the tribes generally held the practices in disdain, but felt helpless in the turning tide of the onslaught of ‘civilization.’

### **Wounded Knee Massacre**

The unfortunate and bloody climax of the historic Sioux religion took place on a bitterly cold morning in January of 1891. A rather large band of Sioux were hastily being relocated to the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, and were forced to stop on the wayside due to the unkind change in the weather. The commanding officer of the cavalry unit assigned to the band ordered a disarmament as the first order of business of the morning, and collected large piles of rifles from the Sioux.<sup>45</sup> After a bizarre sequence of events, a single shot was fired from an unknown source, and the cavalry officers opened fire with their accompanying Hotchkiss guns. At the end of several heated exchanges of fire, an estimated 250-300 Sioux men, women, and children were dead or left dying on the field, while less than 30 U.S. soldiers were killed, mostly from stray bullets and accidents.<sup>46</sup> Black Elk recalls this incident as the diminishment of the infamous Oglala hope, and the death of the true religion and traditions, in his own words, “the old ways.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The path that follows behind may often give insight into the path that lies ahead, but this is not always the case. Is it ever true that the most noble action at certain times is in fact refraining from the imparting of wisdom gained by experiences? Black Elk apparently thought so, to the extent that he abandoned his most prized encounter of the spiritual for the sake of his

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(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Mooney.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



living grandchildren. Some, even of his very blood, may take this action to be a stout desertion of the faith. How true is this? It would be near impossible to argue that the Sioux faith is without a richly flowing heritage, brimming with tradition, narrative, and ritual that are honored to the point of martyrdom. Such conviction brings with it a solemn responsibility – that is, it's self-preservation for the benefit of those to come. With complacency comes the death of a heritage, as the proponents of the Ghost Religion cruelly came to appreciate. Without a conscious effort to preserve the contributions of past thinkers, lovers, and doers, we take the same risk every day we take our costly belief so mundanely. Although historians mark the fall of traditional Sioux religion with the regrettable massacre of Wounded Knee, even today it is still alive. Not in the deep recesses of the remote sweat lodges, but in the bright and enquiring minds of the Sioux youth of today. There truly is a fork in the road in the fate of the Sioux tribe: the high road – a deep-seated appreciation of and challenge to the Oglala philosophers, priests, and leaders of the past; the low road – slip back downwards into the pit of complacent acknowledgement of the mere facts history records.

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<sup>47</sup> Neihardt and Black Elk.

- - Nelson Range

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