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SONG TEXTS AND THEIR PERFORMERS

THE CENTERPIECE OF CONTEMPORARY LAKOTA IDENTITY FORMULATION

R. D. THEISZ

During the 1960s and 1970s both American Indians and non-Indians showed intense interest in and awareness of the Indian world, and many traditional activities became more popular. This boom atmosphere has waned in the late 1980s, and Indian youths and young adults have therefore changed the focus of their search for identity formulation.¹ In this article, I have been concerned with an aspect of Lakota traditionalism that is being granted more and more significance in the Lakota scheme of things—traditional song and dance. I have based the article on my readings in ethnomusicological literature, my informal observations over many years on the “pow-wow trail” as a regular member of the Porcupine Singers (a well-known traditional singing group), and on a comprehensive questionnaire that I designed and sent to knowledgeable or

influential singers and dancers. Many of the quotations in the text below were derived from responses to the questionnaire.

THE GROWING CULTURAL CENTRALITY OF LAKOTA SONG AND DANCE

Before discussing my findings, I wish to establish that traditional song and dance are, in fact, central to Lakota culture and are becoming more important. When I speak of song and dance, I will in general be referring to a whole musical complex that includes the following:

1. music, primarily vocal and instrumental (especially the drum)
2. dance as it blends with song
3. costuming and paraphernalia
4. the context, such as traditional celebrations, dancing contests, or other related situations in which singing and dancing may play a part (for example, funerals, graduation ceremonies, family dinners, and give-aways)
5. the matrix of prayers, announcements, anecdotes, instruction to the public, and explanations

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FIG. 1. Porcupine Singers, a traditional Lakota singing group (author standing, left). Tsuji Photo.

6. the use of traditional tribal music on two Indian-operated radio stations in South Dakota, KILI (Porcupine) and KINI (St. Francis)

I reject isolating the components of the musical complex and have chosen the term “song/dance” to represent conveniently the entire musical complex. I have used the term “traditional music” to separate this form from some more or less contemporary variations not considered here, such as Lakota Native American Church songs, Christian hymns, and folk, country/western, or rock musics that show some Lakota flavor in performance, text, or ideology.

Several reasons lead me to postulate a strong viability for the musical complex. My personal observations in Lakota communities since 1962, primarily on the Rosebud, Pine Ridge, and Cheyenne River reservations,

indicate that some very clear changes have taken place in how song/dance is viewed. Scholars have not yet provided definitive explanations for the preeminence of music and dance, although they have ventured some interpretations, frequently in passing or in pursuit of a different issue.² Contemporary Lakotas who reflect on the function of music and dance often mention cultural transmission. The majority of Lakota song/dance practitioners will speak of “passing down the oral tradition,” “keeping up and expressing tradition,” and “keeping the heritage going” as they formulate their personal positions on the place of song and dance.³ Calvin Jumping Bull of Oglala, South Dakota, accordingly advises parents to teach children the proper meaning behind music and dance so that the traditional essence of dancing is retained.⁴

Other Lakota views on the function of song and dance include the joy of getting

together with other Indians while dancing and singing, the role of honoring and recognizing each other, and the spiritual dimension of the dance complex.⁵ Ben Black Bear, Sr., stresses dancing as physical exercise, as a release for stress and conflict, and as a way of being open to others and the Great Spirit instead of restricted to the self only.⁶ The idea that music provides therapy for the stresses of modern life has been proposed by Frank Clarke, M. D., who cites research on the influence of rhythmic beat on heart rate, speed of circulation, and brainwaves, all factors conducive to well-being. The beat of a drum, for example, induces "deeper alpha waves" in the brain that lead to more profound thinking and learning.⁷ The holistic attitude of Indian people that is finding an increasingly vital psychotherapeutic medium in song/dance would thus seem scientifically verified. This recognition of the effect of song/dance on physical and mental well-being is echoed by several Lakotas who are involved with the music tradition. Leo Her Many Horses, Jr., cites the "form of healing" and the furthering of "community peace." Howard Bad Hand and Cordelia Attack Him point to the "release of tension" and "the clearing" of mind and heart. Marvin Ghost Bear also stresses the social function of providing a "source of strength for daily survival."⁸ Whichever aspect of the song/dance tradition is emphasized, its potency in current Lakota thinking appears to be undeniable.

The historical role of song/dance among the Oglala and Sicangu Sioux from 1883 to 1923 is examined cogently by Mark Thiel, who stresses its ongoing vitality with changes only in form. He calls song/dance the "most viable surviving preservation activity" and points out that it is "virtually the only available leisure activity of the early reservation period." Thiel also provides a valuable overview of missionary, reformer, and government opposition to song/dance up to the 1920s. It is clear that such opposition attests to the idea that song/dance was viewed as a central cultural dynamic that stood in the way of "civilization." Interesting for my inquiry is Thiel's

observation on the increased success of these groups in their attempts to enforce dance prohibition on the Sioux reservations by the first decade of the twentieth century.⁹ Thus private and government efforts to prevent song/dance were beginning to bear fruit until the late 1920s and 1930s when the New Deal climate actually encouraged expressions of tribal culture.

The temporary decline in song/dance around the turn of the century seems to have been repeated in the 1950s and early 1960s. The older Lakotas maintained their song/dance heritage, but the younger generation did not find song/dance attractive or meaningful. However, the decline slowed in the late 1960s and reversed itself by the middle 1980s; singing and dancing have now become predominant symbols of being a Lakota.

ATTITUDES OF LAKOTA YOUNG PEOPLE

The blossoming of Indian dancing clubs in contemporary schools clearly shows the growing preeminence of song/dance. It is indeed rare today to find a South Dakota school, either on or off the reservation, with any considerable Indian population that does not boast of a dancing club. Some clubs are supported by federal monies (Title IV and Title VII) and some even by local funds, but others depend on the support of the parents and the interest as well as initiative of the students. Twenty years ago such school-based clubs were a rarity. Now the Pine Ridge dancing clubs organization exemplifies their popularity. Several enterprising parents have boosted enrollment to about 750 students aged six to eighteen in fourteen dancing clubs. In all cases one of the primary motives for the existence of the clubs is the conviction that they help the students involved foster a healthier self-concept based on cultural pride and knowledge.¹⁰ Even some programs aimed at prevention and reduction of drug/alcohol abuse among school age children have selected music and dance as preventive therapy.¹¹ The gratification resulting from peer admiration as

well as the benevolent approval of the older generation that is bestowed on younger dancers and singers creates a supportive fabric for those involved.

The social status of music and dance among college-age Lakota people is evident in the place that the powwow, the *wacipi* (dance), or the dancing/singing contest takes in the activities representing their Indianness that these students choose to present to their peers on off-reservation campuses, to their local college communities, and to their relations back home.¹² Invariably the students select song and dance performance as the center of gravity for such "awareness days." Though speakers on Indian topics, Indian-oriented films, Indian art or fashion shows, craft sales, banquets or feeds, or athletic events may also be on the program, the powwow clearly represents the climax in the more elaborate programs or the only activity in the more modest. Even within the Indian colleges and community colleges located on the reservations, this situation is quite typical. It must be conceded that ceremonies—especially the Inipi (sweat lodge), Cannumpa (Sacred Pipe), Sun Dance, Lowanpi, and Yuwipi ceremonies—would possibly rank a close second to song and dance in the college campus identity hierarchy, but there is concern and even apprehension that an off-reservation campus context may be an inappropriate setting for events of such a sacred nature. It is an exception when one or more of these ceremonies are occasionally included in off-reservation activities.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE SINGER

In the twenty-three years of my involvement, I have observed some modification in the makeup of traditional Lakota singing groups. The average age of singers appears to have declined. In the early 1960s through the early 1970s, the majority of singers were middle-aged or older, but during the 1970s more singers in their teens and twenties stepped into the limelight of the dance shades

or halls. As these younger singers or singing groups achieved a position of artistic respectability in the community, with their fellow singers, and among the dancers, they pursued a course of interest in and performance of popular intertribal dance songs—the latest hits on the powwow circuit. However, in the last ten years or so, younger groups have deliberately sought to broaden their stock of so-called traditional songs of Lakota tribal vintage using the Lakota language.

At the same time, it has struck me that the older pre-1970s singers tended to be identifiable as full-blood Lakotas who spoke the language.¹³ Others, once identifying themselves as *iyekas* (white speakers, translators), today called mixed-bloods, historically showed little interest in becoming singers or felt an antipathy directed at them by the established singers who were perceived as being full-blood and native speakers.¹⁴ Yet, in recent years, a considerable number of younger singers have emerged who are identified as not being full-blood. Exactly how many of them speak Lakota fluently is difficult to ascertain given the current range of language competency, but it is certain that some speak little and others virtually no Lakota at all.

How do these singers, limited in their ability to speak Lakota, render traditional songs which contain texts of varying linguistic complexity? Some barely mouth the words, relying on fellow singers with greater language facility to render the text while they sing the vocables. Others learn the basic repertoire of their singing group well enough to memorize the necessary words. It does help that the formulaic breadth of the currently circulating traditional songs is more limited than in the past. A few of the singers in question have made a deliberate effort to learn some of the necessary language skills. The loss of Lakota language fluency has resulted in the claim by some older singers that some song texts of current composition "don't make sense," or that they contain some grammatically incorrect phrases.¹⁵

In seeking to verify my observations I have,



FIG. 2. *Grand entry, Bismarck, North Dakota, Powwow, 1981. Tsuji Photo.*

or course, considered the literature on Lakota music or, in academic terms, the ethnomusico-logical literature. Most useful to my concerns in this essay were some of the works of Frances Densmore, William K. Powers, William Paige, and Ben Black Bear, Sr., and myself.¹⁶ In addition, in the winter of 1984 I composed a questionnaire of sixty-six questions regarding what I would call the sociology of the Lakota singer. My purpose was to determine who the singer was, and what he has to say about his craft and the place of music in Lakota society today, as well as to explore related questions. I sent the questionnaires to head singers, other singers (both male and female), as well as some dancers I consider knowledgeable and representative of the corps of Lakota dancers. Realizing the hesitancy of some Lakota to correspond by mail, I kept my expectations of responses fairly low. I also pondered Bruno Nettl's view that Native Americans "do not ordinarily discuss such matters (conscious composition) among themselves" and "conse-

quently native informants have trouble explaining the technique to investigators."¹⁷ By contrast, Alan P. Merriam presents a different opinion regarding native verbalization of their musical style that he ascribes to cultural differences between the researcher/ethnographer and the native singer.¹⁸ Powers suggests that the problem lies basically in the manner of eliciting the questions, especially in the researcher's use of compartmentalized technical language.¹⁹ I would add further that I believe a personal relationship to the singer/dancer is also significant. If the investigator is related to the singer/dancer, by kinship or through the traditional manner of adoption, or has some other acquaintance with the singer/dancer, the investigator will frequently be able to request information in the more compelling manner accorded relatives or colleagues. In the face of possible disappointment, then, I sent out the questionnaires. I sought to keep the questions open, to use the jargon (in English) I had heard for many years sitting

around the drum, and to write to singers and dancers I was relatively close to. My personal relationships stood me in good stead and my return was gratifying. Although I have not here undertaken the complete analysis and discussion of the survey response, I have cited those results which support my contentions for this article.

The survey response received clearly supports my personal observations regarding the centrality of song/dance, and the changing age and identity of the singer. The respondents overwhelmingly state that they believe there are more singers today than in the past, that the singers are younger, and that fewer singers speak Lakota or perhaps are even at home with the traditional life. Yet respondents believe that song/dance represents the Lakota heritage and is essential for its preservation. Although I am confident that singers are getting younger, I am not unaware that musicologists of the past have sought out older singers when transcribing or recording music. Musicologists frequently relied on the authoritative, often oldest, singers of a band or community, and especially solicited ceremonial and warrior era songs or songs predating the time of the actual recording situation. Frances Densmore is a clear case in point. We need to be reminded, perhaps, that younger singers certainly abounded at the time, but as they were not perceived to be keepers of the venerable tradition—by either their own communities or the outside recorders—their performances, their stock of songs, and their ideas on the musical heritage of their people were generally not recorded. The presence of younger singers as active performers might thus have been underrated. While the older singers are still accorded great respect, especially as resources for older songs, their number is diminishing in relation to the rising crop of younger singers.

LAKOTA SONG TEXTS

I have thus far refrained from dealing with ceremonial music since it occupies a unique

cultural niche. In the earlier ethnomusicological record, songs of the warrior societies and the warrior ethos are second only to the sacred chants, formulas, magical incantations, and mythical songs that dominate the literature.²⁰ By contrast, the works of Powers, Paige, and Black Bear and myself endeavor to pay secular or social music its due. I include the array of honor songs, memorial songs, committee songs, veteran's songs, New Year's songs, contest songs, and the like that forms the quintessence of the musical tradition today. However, a parallel stock of sacred songs (Sacred Pipe, Sweat Lodge, Sun Dance, Low-anpi/Yuwipi, Hunka, and Kettle Dance, is also experiencing a current consolidation.²¹

I propose a triadic typology for the text themes of the secular mode in the literature as well as from the oral tradition. The first category is warrior era song texts that may be said to persist until World War I. Certainly modifications may be posited within this broad category such as references to the horse in the middle 1700s or references to non-Indians in the 1800s. References to non-Indians include those to the *mila hanska* (cavalry) in place of tribal enemies such as the Kangi (Crow) or Palanipe (Pawnee). The second category of song texts may be termed songs of foreign wars and the third category I label as songs of cultural affirmation.

In the foreign war category, some scholars have made note of the residual tradition of the *akicita okolakiciye* (warrior societies) into the middle-twentieth century.²² Significantly, however, during the two World Wars and the Korean conflict, song texts of the earlier warrior vintage evolved into soldier or veterans' songs confronting the foes of the United States (Germans and Japanese) instead of the traditional tribal enemies or the cavalry. One *waktegli* (victory) song, for example, refers to shooting down "a high flying plane" while another song refers to *onapobiya* (bombs exploding).²³ This pattern continued with the Vietnam war, though with considerably less fervor than before. Few Vietnam songs were newly composed for the returning veterans.

Instead earlier song texts were slightly modified to suit the current context. This diminished text composition activity is most likely a result of the ambiguous response to the Vietnam War even among Lakotas. This decline in original composition, however, might also be seen as expressing a feeling of reverence for older songs or as resulting from the general decline in both the warrior and foreign war song categories.

I base the third category, cultural affirmation texts, on the many songs I have recorded and transcribed since 1962. A survey of the themes of current traditional songs shows the strong emergence of Lakota identity motifs. I have isolated three types of motifs, although many songs display more, that represent the typical formulas of cultural affirmation songs:

Type A. *Lakolwicoh'an ki wašte walakelo* (I like my Lakota ways); *Lakotapi ki tewahila yelo* (I cherish the Lakota ways)

Type B. *Lakotapi tehikelo* (Lakota ways are difficult); *Lakol wicoh'an ki otehikelo* (Lakota ways are difficult); *iyotiye wakiye* (I am having a difficult time); *tamunkašni yelo* (hard times are ahead); *ota kuye wanicele* (I have few relatives here, little support); *blihic' iyapo* (take courage); *iha wa u welo* (I come smiling nevertheless); *maka sitomniya otehikelo* (all over the world hardships are being experienced); *ohunkašni ota yelo* (there are many unfortunate ones); *otakuye ko a i mayapelo* (even though my relatives are talking about me)

Type C. *waci wicaša heya a u welo* (the dancers say as they come); *ate heya welo* (my father said); *oyate ki heya pelo* (the people have said this)

The three types of formulas are deliberately categorized to make my point. Type A expresses the love of one's heritage; Type B confirms the cultural will to persevere in spite of hardships, alienation, acculturation pressures, and other demands from within and without the Lakota community; and Type C shows the consensus of "the people," of their representatives—especially the *waci wicaša* (male dancers)—to verify the truth of the statements.²⁴ The speaker of the text is not advancing merely personal convictions. I have not found references in the literature or in the Lakota oral tradition to these affirmative motifs, especially in their triadic interrelationship, before the early 1960s.²⁵ Although the overall repertoire of text themes is narrower today than in the warrior or World War eras, I would also claim an increasing formulaic density of these motifs in newly composed or revised song texts. Song has thus become a vehicle to proclaim cultural pride and ethnicity in the face of acculturative tension from one's own people and the dominant society.

CONCLUSION

Secular song and dance, I submit, play an increasingly central role for Lakota people seeking to establish their identity as members of a group in relationship to the "other," the external, dominant society. Whether ceremonial song will keep pace with the ideology of the secular remains to be determined. At any rate, song/dance has become a focal point for a shared, internal ethnic identity. This phenomenon reflects a common Fourth World response to external sociocultural and economic pressures in retrenching or at least emphasizing tribal traditions, as Nelson Gruburn points out.²⁶

By selecting the song/dance expressions, it might be argued by some, Lakotas are adopting part of the stereotype of the "colorful, dancing, feathered Native." Yet, in spite of the popularity of dancing in shows or for tourists in such celebrations as "frontier days" and old Wild West shows, or even the Boy Scout



FIG. 3. Fancy dance contestants displaying their numbers after a contest round. Tsuji Photo.

movement's adaptation of Indian dances, the dominant society understands so little of the essence of song/dance that it must be seen as a Lakota form of resistance and a bolstering of ethnicity, not as an imposed or borrowed identity.²⁷ I therefore see the growing popularity of song/dance as positive physical and psychological self-expression and as the prevailing affirmation of personal identity and group solidarity for Lakota people.

NOTES

1. For an analysis of the Oglala in the 1960s, see Robert Daniels, "Cultural Identities among the Oglala Sioux," in E. Nurge, ed., *The Modern Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), pp. 198-245. Other essays in the same volume also touch on the issue of identity and identity transformation. Further representative treatments are Darryl Zitzow and George Estes, "The Heritage Continuum in Counseling Native American Students," *American Indian Issues in Higher Education*

(Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, University of California, 1981), pp. 133-42; Bea Medicine, "The American Indian in Modern Society," in John R. Milton, ed., *The American Indian Speaks* (Vermillion, S. Dak.: Dakota Press, 1969), pp. 189-91; Alan L. Sorkin, *The Urban American Indian* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1978); and Jack Waddell and O. Michael Watson, *The American Indian in Urban Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

2. See, for example, Daniels, "Cultural Identities"; also William K. Powers, "Contemporary Oglala Music and Dance: Pan-Indianism versus Pan-Tetonism," in E. Nurge, ed., *The Modern Sioux*, pp. 268-89.

3. Survey respondents quoted here are Fred Stands, David Clairmont, Matt Pumpkin Seed, Cordelia Attack Him, Leo Her Many Horses, Jr., Severt Young Bear, Albert White Hat, and Howard Bad Hand.

4. Calvin Jumping Bull in *Oglala Sioux Community College Graduation Powwow and Dance Contest Booklet* (Oglala, S. Dak.: 1983).

5. Survey respondents Verdell Blue Arm, William Horn Cloud, Severt Young Bear, Cordelia Attack Him, and Marvin Ghost Bear.

6. Ben Black Bear, Sr. and R. D. Theisz, *Songs and Dances of the Lakota* (Rosebud, S. Dak.: Sinte Gleska College, 1976), p. 27.

7. Frank Clarke, "Modern Medicine Learns from Traditional Indian Ways," *Lakota Times* 23 January 1985, p. 10.

8. Survey respondents.

9. Mark Thiel, "An Enduring Celebration: The Omaha Dance in Oglala and Sicangu Sioux History, 1883-1923," unpublished manuscript, 1985, pp. 3, 9-18.

10. The 1984 Bilingual Education (Title VII) Proposal of the Pierre Indian Learning Center, Pierre, S. Dak., specifically lists the establishment of an Indian Dancing Club in order "to build self-esteem" (p. 33). The center serves a clientele of about 150 Indian students who have social, family, and various learning disabilities.

11. The Shannon County School summer cultural youth seminars of 1983 and 1984 held at Batesland, S. Dak., are a clear case in point.

12. Stan Steiner, in *The New Indians* (New York: Delta Books, 1968), p. 157, chronicles the place of song and dance in the protest movement of the "New Indians" adding, "the ancient dances become a personal chronicle of the journey to the new tribalism."

13. No true consensus exists in the academic or even Indian community on who and what is "traditional." The marginal cases of the full-blood or the mixed-blood are too tenuous; the clear-cut cases are based on self-identification with the concurrence of the majority of the community.

14. Somewhat the same held true, though to a lesser degree, for dancers who were not full-blood. I remember a conversation in 1973 with a Lakota man in his late twenties who came from a mixed-blood ranching community and whom I had known to be a dancer. When I asked during a winter dance why he quit dancing and was merely looking on, he answered, smiling, that he didn't look "Indian enough." Since then, by contrast, many young men clearly identifying themselves as *iyekas* and seen as such in the community have become dancers.

15. Calvin Jumping Bull, personal interview, June, 1984; Louis Garcia, Tokio, North Dakota, correspondence, 8 April 1985.

16. Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972); William K. Powers, "Contemporary Oglala Music;" William K. Powers, "Oglala Song Terminology," pp. 23-41; William K. Powers, "The Sioux Omaha Dance," *American*

Indian Tradition 8. 1 (1961): 24-33; William K. Powers, "The Rabbit Dance," *American Indian Tradition* 8. 3 (1962): 113-18; William K. Powers, "Sneak-Up Dance, Drum Dance, and Flag Dance," *American Indian Tradition* 8. 4 (1962): 166-71; Harry W. Paige, *Songs of the Teton Sioux* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1970); Black Bear and Theisz, *Songs and Dances*.

17. Bruno Nettl, *Music in Primitive Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 16.

18. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 169-70.

19. Powers, "Oglala Song Terminology," p. 24.

20. See, for example, Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*; and Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book, Songs and Legends of the American Indians* (New York: Dover, 1968).

21. See John Around Him and Albert White Hat, *Lakota Ceremonial Songs* (Rosebud, S. Dak.: Sinte Gleska College, 1983).

22. See Paige, *Songs of the Teton Sioux*; Powers; and Reginald and Gladys Laubin, *Indian Dances of North America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).

23. I have discussed the occurrence of foreign (European) enemies in Lakota song texts elsewhere. R. D. Theisz, "The Bad Speakers and the Long Braids. The Depiction of Foreign Enemies in Lakota Song Texts," in Christian Fiest, *The Indian and Europe* (Vienna: in publication, 1987).

24. In the Lakota oral narrative tradition the formal closing *ške* (it is said, they say) fulfills the same function. See Ella Deloria, *Dakota Texts* (Vermillion, S. Dak.: Dakota Press, 1978), p. x.

25. Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, p. 517, includes a single example of what appears to be an early prototype from the Sisseton. Her translation of the text reads: "The great grandfather (the President) has said so they report 'Dakotas be citizens,' he said, so they report but it will be impossible for me. The Dakota (ways) them I love I said. Therefore I have helped (to keep up the old ways)."

26. Nelson Graburn, ed. *Ethnic and Tourist Arts. Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 24.

27. I agree here with Graburn who raises this issue in reference to Fourth World artists in general who may retain an "authentic ethnic identity" in spite of threats to the contrary. See Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, p. 32.