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Review of Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota

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BOOK REVIEWS

Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota. By William K. Powers. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. Table of contents, photographs, tables, notes, phonological key, glossary, bibliography, appendices, index. xvi + 247 pp. \$24.95.

As early as 1851 the missionary Stephen Return Riggs remarked in the introduction to his grammar and dictionary of Dakota (eastern Sioux) that the shamans used a sacred language unknown to the common people. At the turn of the century the Pine Ridge Reservation physician James R. Walker, a dedicated student of Oglala Sioux ethnography, also referred to a ceremonial language known only to shamans. He, like Riggs and others who have mentioned it, gave only a small number of examples, all common words in the language that had been given different, or occult, meanings in order to obfuscate the shaman's speech. How extensive this "sacred language" was, however, has never been fully documented.

Thus *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* promised to be an exciting book: one that would at last fully document this form of discourse and contextualize it in historical and contemporary Lakota soci-

ety. It is, however, not that. Despite the beguiling title, it is a collection of disparate essays, only one of which discusses the sacred language mentioned in historical sources. These essays might have constituted a successful book had they been unified by some common theme and insightfully crafted from new data. But Powers' notion of sacred discourse unfortunately fails as a unifying theme; and the content of the papers is vitiated by fundamental analytic shortcomings, factual errors, and a notable lack of new ethnographic data. If this were not enough, the essays are further impaired by endless polemics and self-serving criticisms of other anthropologists, past and present, all presented in the spurious guise of "theoretical" debate or as "corrections" to mistakes.

In the first paper Powers distinguishes between "sacred language" used by medicine men for philosophical discussion of religion, and "vision talk," an idiosyncratic speech form peculiar to each medicine man and used by him to communicate with his spiritual helper. Vision talk is a private form of ritual discourse, but what it is like is left to the reader's imagination since it is not described in this book.

Although the discussion of sacred language is intended to be based on linguistic processes,

it consists only of a series of ad hoc explanations that reduce to a failure to find any general principles accounting for the formation of such terms. Failing to find a discrete dialect or argot, Powers defines sacred language as a restricted set of lexical items used in ritual or sacred contexts. Its incomprehensibility is not that most of this speech is unrecognizable but that the religious or philosophical tenets of Lakota culture hold that common people are not *supposed* to understand it. This inability to comprehend it, according to Powers, is a matter of faith. Such a contextual definition, however, seems to this reviewer to be vacuous since it means, of course, that all Lakota speech is potentially sacred language, the only prerequisite being a ritual context with medicine men discussing the sacred. The absurdity of this definition is demonstrated by the glossary at the end of the book, where nearly every word is immediately recognizable to a fluent speaker of Lakota.

The second essay discusses Oglala song terminology. In it Powers argues ponderously that, in contrast to Western man who sees music as part of his culture, Oglalas conceptualize it as emanating from the body, along with other natural functions, and as part of the natural world, reflecting the culture:nature dichotomy of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He suggests that derivational elements in verbs of vocal activity (the instrumental prefix *ya-* 'with the mouth' and *ho* 'voice') substantiate his contention, but evidence to date for other languages has failed to support unequivocally a correlation between formal linguistic elements and cultural perception of the world.

Perhaps the most substantial paper is the third one, which is a detailed presentation of twenty-six songs occurring in a contemporary Yuwipi ceremony. For each song the Lakota text is given, followed by an English translation, explanation of the place and meaning of it within the ceremony, and performance notes. Powers insists that the lyrics are sacred language, even though the songs are sung by groups of secular men and the texts are perfectly transparent Lakota. The value of the transcriptions as linguistic texts,

however, is diminished by Powers' failure to use a fully phonemic orthography—a serious breach of scholarly standards in a book ostensibly devoted to linguistic topics.

Another basic linguistic shortcoming emerges in the fourth essay, in which Powers dogmatically proclaims that most previous translators of Sioux—Catholic missionaries and anthropologists—have misunderstood Lakota religious concepts and incompetently translated terms for them into English. A ubiquitous term to which he devotes much discussion is *wak'aⁿ*, usually translated as "holy," but which in a paper by DeMallie and Lavenda was also translated as "power." Powers ridicules the authors, saying that the term "can only mean 'sacred.'" Here he is patently incorrect. There is ample documentation that the term means "holy, sacred, mysterious, powerful (in a supernatural sense), awesome." All of these terms convey the semantic range of *wak'aⁿ*, which is simply wider than any one of its English counterparts. When Powers insists on "sacred" as the only possible translation, he falls victim to the very fault he imputes to missionaries: confusion of Christian and Indian concepts.

The final essay argues for the lack of a shaman:priest distinction. Although this contention is undoubtedly true for the Lakota, Powers overstates his case by generalizing on the basis of his Oglala perspective that "there are no real differences between the traits" of shaman and priest and that such a cultural dichotomy is only an artifact of the analyst. Anyone familiar with the cultures of the horticultural Pawnee and Arikara, for example, would know that they, among other tribes, exemplify societies in which there is a clear distinction between these two types of ritual specialists. Had Powers read beyond his limited focus of interest, he surely would not have dismissed a classification appropriate for many cultures.

In the introduction Powers relates an anecdote that is, ironically, the best commentary on the level of error and relative paucity of data to be found in these essays—in short, on his methodology. He states that time after time in

his studies at Pine Ridge he was led from home to home seeking an answer to a linguistic question. One typical experience was an entire afternoon spent finding an old man and then listening for hours to his harangues about life's social problems in order to elicit the term for the notch in an arrow. At the end of a long, tiresome visit, the man gave the term *ikpe*, which Powers assumes was what he sought. One need only look in either of the major dictionaries of Sioux (Riggs or Buechel) to learn that the term is actually *ikpage*. One can only surmise that Powers' informant delayed him so long because he could not remember the correct form and then came out with an imperfect variant. The lesson, of course, is obvious: one needs to utilize carefully all historical sources and not waste entire afternoons trying to obtain a single arcane form. If this typifies the pace and quality of Powers' data collection, it is quite understandable why this book offers so little and cannot be used as an authoritative source on Sioux linguistics and ethnography.

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