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WALKING THE SKY

VISIONARY TRADITIONS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

LEE IRWIN

The shared worldviews of the indigenous peoples of North America are rooted and linked in a rich pre-Columbian artifactual and oral past that is still highly active today. One perspective into these worlds is obtained by understanding the nature of dreams and visions. In traditional Native American cultures, such a perspective is an essential part of the search for spiritual knowledge where dreams and visions represent contacts with primordial sources of empowerment. To perceive this search for empowerment requires an appreciation of the visionary experience, an experience which has often been denied or marginalized in the dominant cultures.¹

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The challenge of understanding such a remarkable and complex worldview, one based on the significance and centrality of dreams and visions, requires a fundamental reorientation toward the phenomena of dreaming and its creative role in the formation of cultural values. In turn, this requires a reconfiguration of religious topology and a recognition of the purposeful intent implicit in the dreaming experience. This essay facilitates this reconfiguration with an analysis of ethnographic materials collected on Plains dreaming over the last 150 years, focusing primarily upon the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This focus, however, should be seen only as a necessary delimitation on a very widespread and continuing phenomena among contemporary Plains peoples.

THE VISIONARY WORLDVIEW

While a number of classic articles have been written on Plains visionary traditions, little has been written on the underlying epistemological bases for the dream experience and how this experience is integrated into a religious worldview.² To demonstrate the role of

visions as central to a religious worldview, it is first necessary to develop a comparative analysis of the threefold mythic strata of that religious world and the accessibility of that world through visionary experience. The vision is fundamental to a shared epistemology as a visionary epistemé or worldview.³ Such a worldview is distinct from the Euro-American epistemé in its fundamental acceptance of the sacred nature of dreams and visions as a primary form of perception and knowledge. Dreams are neither "epiphenomenal" nor are they peripheral to personal growth and empowerment. The centrality of the vision throughout Plains religious traditions is attested to by each generation of dream seekers who return from a vision quest with new power and ability given to them by the dream-spirits. This affirmation of the sacred nature of dreams is further enhanced by the many spontaneous visions that equal or surpass the experiences of the structured quest.

Each vision or dream contributes to a general Plains epistemology in which visionary experience is integral to everyday waking consciousness. The dream or vision is not sharply distinguished and bracketed from ordinary perception as it is in most Euro-American cultures. The visionary epistemé develops through vision and dream experiences and incorporates altered states of awareness as normative to human potential and ability. This spectrum of awareness includes visions, dreams, trance, ritually induced states, and various encounters with sacred beings as normative and desirable. These states are merged and often fade into and out of each other while yet maintaining continuity with everyday awareness. Thus distinctions between dreams or visions are rarely made. The vision experience, however, is a primary vehicle for the manifestation of these states and is actively sought, sometimes under the guidance and direction of experienced elders, and other times alone and without guidance. Understanding Native American religions requires a clear recognition of these states as intrinsic to the structure and organization of a religious cosmology.

This does not mean to imply that all Plains groups constructed their religious worldviews in an identical fashion, nor does it mean to suggest that there is a single, overarching religious view that was the same for all Plains peoples. In fact, Plains religions are highly differentiated, consisting of related or interlocking complexes of religious activity and belief, each one uniquely formulated through a combination of practical experiences, ethnohistorical encounters and variant features of social and cultural organization. On the other hand, the specific materials recorded in the visionary ethnography show a remarkable consistency with many overlapping features. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that each Plains group integrated these visionary encounters into a unique complex of religious values and practices. This is particularly true in distinguishing between Plains hunting cultures like those of the Absarokees, frequently referred to as Crows in history and literature, or Kiowas and the river-valley agricultural peoples like the Pawnees or Hidatsas. Nevertheless many shared characteristics of the visionary episteme can be noted as a means for developing an integrated overview of how the visionary experience was attained, religiously communicated, and sought throughout the Great Plains.

The richness of the mythic contents and the vitality of the dynamic powers of the vision are its most salient features. Figures which appear in visions, called here *dream-spirits*, inhabit many features of either the waking or sleeping continuum. To be in a visionary state is essentially to have contact with the powers that inhabit the sacred ecology of the various world-strata. In this sense, broadly conceived, dream-spirits are experienced as inhabiting a threefold topology (above, middle, below) that ranges from the celestial realm of the sun, moon, stars and the "winged" to the "grass-eaters" of the human realm, and downward into the chthonic realm of underground and underwater animals such as bear and beaver. An excellent example of this is given by E. Adamson Hoebel for the Cheyennes:

The universe [*Hestenov*] is multilayered. Human beings view the universe from the Earth's surface. All above the Earth's surface is *heammahestonev*. All that lies below it is *aktunov*. Along the surface of the earth is a thin layer of air, the atmosphere as perceived by the Cheyenne. Called *taxtavo*, it is a special gift of the spirit beings to humankind, for it makes breathing and life possible. Above the air-layer is *setovo*, the Nearer Sky Space . . . Above everything else is the Blue Sky Space, *aktovo*. Here are visible the sun, the moon, the stars, and the Milky Way. The earth itself consists of two layers. The first is the very thin strip which supports life. It is only as deep as the roots of plants and trees can penetrate. It is known as *votoso*. Beneath it is the stratum called *aktunov*, the Deep Earth.⁴

This sacred topology incorporates all natural phenomena into a unified, multi-layered, visionary world that expresses a primary orientation widely shared by other Plains groups with varying degrees of complexity. The living quality of the world is sacralized by the presence of many animals, sacred objects, and mythic beings seen in visions throughout the Plains.⁵

The concept of a *dream-place*, sanctified by the use of the pipe and marked out through ritual processes, is also fundamental to the organization of visionary experience, marking a specially designated area as a primary manifestation of the holy. This place acts as a point of organization for perception and contact with the empowering presences of the vision and can be established anywhere through rites of sacralization.⁶ At this center, in a visionary state, perceptions of space and time are radically altered—the visionary moves through the mythic strata of the world, experiencing it as sacramentally structured in terms of direction, covering great distances quickly or the revolution of whole seasons as part of ritual cyclical patterns.⁷

The sacred topography is charged with these places of special sanctity, such as bluffs, moun-

tains, and rivers, which are the immediate features of a complex religious cosmos. Further, the dream-spirits inhabiting the various topological strata are believed capable of changing their form and are therefore highly metamorphic.⁸ Though human beings occupy the middle realm, they are generally dependent upon the dream-spirits for guidance and inspiration in all aspects of life. Animals who have a superior knowledge or ability are willing to share their powers with human beings if they are petitioned in the correct manner. Or they may grant their power to someone who is suffering because animals have compassion and pity human beings. Manifestations of the holy occur through an agent-centered dreaming, in which each dream-spirit has a particular form and intention—a particular gift of power to bestow on the successful dreamer. Another shared religious conception held by many Plains visionaries is of a sacred or mysterious presence which is dynamic and active, capable of breaking into human awareness through the vision or dream, whether waking or sleeping, having a somewhat impersonal and unifying character.

This unitary concept of the holy or sacred among most Plains peoples is not systemically or dogmatically defined, nor is it theologically elaborated in philosophical discourses.⁹ Knowledge of visionary experience is esoteric and has many variable interpretations. Certain religious specialists or experienced visionaries have developed highly complex interpretations while others have recorded only minimal verbal definition.¹⁰ While the Omahas had a cosmography of upper and lower realms, they also held a unified concept of their religious world, as summarized by Alice Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche:

The *Wakonda* addressed in the tribal prayer and in the tribal religious ceremonies which pertain to the welfare of all the people is the *Wakonda* that is the permeating life of visible nature—an invisible life and power that reaches everywhere and everything, and can be appealed to by man to

send him help. From this central idea of a permeating life comes, on the one hand, the application of the word *wakonda* to anything mysterious or inexplicable, be it an object or an occurrence; and on the other hand, the belief that the peculiar gifts of an animate or inanimate form can be transferred to man.¹¹

The reality of the sacred for the visionary thus lies in the direct religious experience, grounded in a shared worldview and attained in the form of a visionary dream. As a quality of visionary experiences, the sacred can be conceptualized as expressing variation, creative transformation, and movement and encounter through space and time, resulting in remarkable personal power. The vision experience has contextual continuity with normal life waking experience and is recognizable and congruent with everyday activities. It is neither "transcendent" nor "other-worldly." The social structures of normal communal life are fundamental to the vision. In fact, the most accurate description of the relationship between the visionary and dream-spirits is one of kinship.¹² Visionaries frequently relate to dream-spirits as elders in the kinship network, demonstrating normative attitudes of respect and obedience in the fulfillment of the sacred obligations given them in visions.

Successful dreamers often form visionary societies or join existing societies to consolidate and enhance their social standing as successful dreamers.¹³ Many of these societies are secret and the knowledge communicated in them is inaccessible to non-members. Individual experience is part of a narrative process of sharing the dream and in giving dream-related ritual demonstrations in a community setting. Society members engage in performance and individual rites to demonstrate a powerful connectedness with dream-spirits and other agencies which bestow unusual and often remarkable abilities. The sacred as a concealed presence is agent-centered because its most prominent manifestations are through

ritual enactments. Visionaries and religious specialists who have mastered the techniques of demonstrating power are fully capable of evoking the presences which are symbolized in ritual action.¹⁴ This personal quality of manifesting the sacred is integral to a more shamanistic concept that all powers work together in a unified cosmos to sustain human life through the medium of the vision.

THE VISION QUEST PATTERN

The ethnography of vision seeking reveals three motivations for such a quest: a socially expected obligation usually undertaken at puberty; the search for greater personal empowerment and knowledge; and a communally determined quest to resolve various problems or negative conditions.¹⁵ The intention is similar in all three cases—to acquire power and to enhance the quality of human life.

Visions occur in both structured and unstructured forms. The greater majority of the visions reported in the ethnography are spontaneous, unsolicited visions. These *unstructured visions* are generally reported by those less central to the religious hierarchy, such as women, children and those caught in more marginal and crisis-oriented situations, such as in times of suffering, loss, or periods of emotional disturbance as during family quarrels or disagreements. Women also demonstrate a profound sensitivity for vision experience in the context of the death of a family member.¹⁶

Coyote Woman, a Mandan married to a man who frequently beat and abused her, was sent by her husband to check his pit traps. There she discovered a wolf that spoke to her and coughed up a sacred blue stone to use for healing among her people. The wolf also told her that her husband would not return from his hunting expedition because he would be slain by wolves. The wolf's prediction subsequently proved correct.¹⁷ Another example of a female stress-related vision is that of an

Absarokee woman captured by the Blackfeet who managed to escape and in the process to steal a Piegan otter medicine bundle. In isolation, under stress and fatigue, carrying a highly sacred object, she had a sacred dream in which the otter appeared to her and gave her the gift of instituting a sacred march to the tobacco garden during the annual tobacco planting rites.¹⁸

These spontaneous aspects of the female vision experience, rarely analyzed or studied, express the general Plains Indian belief that visionary powers have greater affinity and spontaneous compassion for women in Plains societies. Many visions of women are highly complex and of fundamental importance in the development of social existence. Through vision experiences, women are able to establish vision societies and to learn new techniques in crafts and in other more male-oriented activities, such as hunting or participation in war parties.¹⁹ They have significant roles in vision interpretation and in the instruction of vision seekers. Most of these roles have been a consequence of the spontaneous aspects of the vision experience. However, some groups did establish a structured quest for adolescent women. For example, young Mandan women sought dreams and visions at the on-set of puberty by fasting at least once on the corn drying scaffolds near the earth-lodges of their mothers.²⁰

The male quest is a more strongly *structured vision* with a procession of events that may be analyzed in five essential stages: purification and preparation; hunger, thirst and deprivation; encounter and presence; instructions and warnings; and return and integration, generally in the form of a ritual enactment. Such a description is necessarily synthetic and comparative, having been drawn from many diverse Plains groups, and represents a general pattern that shares many overlapping features among males of various communities. The various phases of the process are variable and range from a carefully *supervised quest* under the direct care and instruction of an experi-

enced shaman or near relative to the wholly *unsupervised quest* which is undertaken secretly by an individual at times accompanied by a close friend.²¹ In all cases, a purification phase initiates the quest and includes both prayers and offerings as well as a conscious vow to seek a vision. A sweat lodge frequently precedes the actual fasting and is overseen by an experienced elder.

Among the Absarokees and Gros Ventres the body is bathed and then purified by rubbing it with sweet smelling sage.²² Typically, among the nomadic hunting groups, the hair is unbraided as a sign of humility and the only clothing worn is a breechcloth or, often, nothing at all. Nakedness symbolizes the complete dependence of the vision seeker upon the visionary powers and among the Lakotas only a robe or blanket was taken to protect the faster from storms and cold weather.²³ A pipe and a robe are usually brought to the fasting place. This place is then sacralized through the creation of an enclosed circular space for fasting.²⁴ Alternatively, the faster may choose to wander freely across the Plains hoping to encounter a dream-spirit. The length of time spent fasting varies widely and ranges from two to ten days.

Prayer is an inevitable, central aspect of the vision quest and is regarded as such by all Plains peoples. Praying and smoking the pipe are the primary means of communicating with dream-spirits. The primary ethos of prayer in fasting is to become "pitiable" to the dream-spirits and to concentrate the mind completely on attracting their attention.²⁵ This is shown through voluntary fasting from food and water.

Fasters may elect various mortifications. The offerings range from simply holding up the pipe in prayer to cutting off a fingertip or strips of skin from arms or legs. Another type of mortification is dragging buffalo skulls by thongs attached to bone pins driven through the surface flesh of the back or hanging suspended from thongs attached to the flesh over the chest muscles, as among the Mandans or

Cheyennes. Such practices were undertaken primarily on a voluntary basis. The practice of self-injury or extreme mortification was widespread in the northern Plains until the late nineteenth century, though piercing at Sun Dances is still an honorable practice today.²⁶ Engaging in these practices can result in a heightened awareness by which the visionary is able to hear or see unusual events.

Mortification, fasting, and extreme concentration leads to a *threshold experience*—an enhanced awareness during which the visionary suddenly discovers heightened perceptions and sometimes intense feelings of fear or anxiety that can lead to the abandonment of the vision quest. Clark Wissler, noted ethnologist, observed of Blackfeet men “. . . that the majority of young men fail in this ordeal as an unreasonable fear comes down upon them the first night, causing them to abandon their post. Even old experienced men often find the trial more than they can bear.”²⁷ The successful vision is frequently marked by this condition which manifests as a more emotionally charged state of increased awareness and anxiety. Shifting out of the dynamic equilibrium of everyday, ordinary awareness and crossing the critical threshold meant breaking the symmetries of daily perception and action, thereby inducing a potentially higher sense of awareness and empowerment. The visionary realm is experienced as a more potent, more comprehensive, powerful realm, and the threshold experience is the first sign of crossing into that reality. A faster, for example, hears heavy, loud footsteps, the earth shaking—it is a grasshopper approaching the vision circle.²⁸

However, heightened awareness and an increased sensitivity to sounds and sights is not the vision proper. It is a preliminary condition, preceding the actual vision. Entry into the vision experience proper is generally accompanied by very strong awe, amazement, or a profound sense of the sacred.²⁹ The powerful emotional contents of this experience unfortunately are often bracketed by non-native analysts as insignificant features of religious

life when in fact these emotional qualities are central and significant to the very heart of the traditional Plains religious experience. The vision is a very powerful, affective encounter that leaves a life-long impression on the visionary. The vision is vivid, colorful, multidimensional and dramatic, involving a particular cycle of powerful emotional events.

The visionary is frequently taken away from the fasting place on an underworld or an upperworld journey, or the visionary is visited by a dream-spirit that demonstrates remarkable transformation and metamorphosis. After fasting and praying, the Absarokee holy man, Plenty Coups, followed a messenger spirit into the sky where he was instructed by the Winds, Bad Storms and Thunderbeings to become a warrior and leader.³⁰ The journey is a central feature of the vision and symbolizes yet another important aspect of the experience.

The manifest appearance of the dream-spirit often shifts several times during the encounter, changing its size and appearance, and flowing through animal and human (or sometimes mythic) forms. Such metamorphoses contribute to the transformative nature of the natural and social world, enhancing the visionary's sense of the transmutable nature of personal and collective existence. This is congruent with the ability of developed religious specialists or shamans who take on the qualities and remarkable powers of their personal dream-spirits and who, in some cases, actually become those dream-spirits. The visionary enters fully into the visionary worldview or epistémé and experiences a collapse of normal space and time perceptions: time contracts or expands, space is intensified by the presence of a sacred being, and the visionary walks into a butte or goes beneath a river into an underwater lodge.³¹ The continuity of the vision is *unilinear* and moves unbrokenly through the experience toward its completion; visionary narrators never present a rupture or break in the continuity once the threshold has been crossed.³² Thus, the unfolding of the visionary reality affirms the religious view of a sacred

world and acts to legitimize the validity of traditional beliefs.

THE VISIONARY POWER

At the height of the experience, the visionary receives explicit instructions from the dream-spirit. This instruction is both verbal and non-verbal with the verbal aspect being highly abbreviated and symbolic, suggesting the structural importance of imagistic communication. Various types of speech are delineated in the ethnography which are specific to the visionary context. Three recognizable verbal patterns can be identified: dialogical interactions, commands or instructions, and sacred songs or chants. All of these are exceedingly brief and condensed forms of communication.³³

The most significant type of speech act is the *dream song*, the form of which is very condensed and metaphoric. The function of such a song is primarily to invoke the specific nature or presence of the power that has been given. The more expressive, behavioral aspect of the vision requires the visionary to imitate the actions and appearance of the dream-spirit. For example, Walter McClintock described the Blackfoot healer, Rattler, performing an eagle doctor healing. "In his supernatural experience an eagle-helper had appeared in a dream to Rattler," recorded McClintock, "and bestowed upon him the power to cure. The eagle gave him the songs, showed him the motions to use in doctoring, and directed him how to proceed." Observed McClintock, Rattler "imitated a flying eagle and swayed his body rhythmically in time with our chant."³⁴ Such imitation also includes the making of various objects and their use in a prescribed manner as well as other types of symbolic expression through the correct use of paint, feathers and other personal adornments.

In no case is the gift of power exclusively identified with the object or the various symbols of the power given. The visionary power works through the visionary and is often in-

corporated into the visionary's body, but its ultimate origin lies with the dream-spirits that communicate it as a gift to the visionary. This gift is usually accompanied by certain prescriptions and proscriptions, a distinction that is essential to the use of power. *Prescriptions* refer to the specific means by which the power is evoked and used; *proscriptions* refer to the inhibition of normally acceptable social behavior for the purpose of maintaining power.³⁵ Power is always accompanied by responsibility and by the possibility of its abuse, loss, or misuse. Prescriptions help to realize the gift, and proscriptions are followed to prevent its loss or to prevent over-identification with the dream-spirit. For example, a Canadian Plains (Stoney) Assiniboine woman who received bear power refused to eat bear meat, but when she unintentionally did so, "she came near being transformed into a bear herself."³⁶ Further dream power can be dangerous and work against the visionary if the prescriptive or proscriptive injunctions are ignored or performed in a half-hearted manner.³⁷

Sacred power in Plains Indian ethnography is described as dynamic and manifesting through actual demonstrations in both the vision and during the ritual re-enactment. It is primarily *instrumental*, working not only through human agency but also through a variety of carefully handled sacramental objects. Qualitatively, power is epitomized as extraordinary ability and signified in events that are outstanding and remarkable. Its nature is mysterious. Quantitatively, it is most active and observable in ritual processes which direct the unique abilities of numerous individuals in such rites as the Sun Dance or the more contemporary Yuwipi. It manifests through individuals, who become superordinate agents of dream-spirits that work collectively to enhance the good of the community or to assist those in need of help. Power is articulated as a quality of the sacred. The sacred is conceptualized by advanced visionaries and religious specialists as a more comprehensive concept, a presence that permeates existence and is

essentially unknowable in itself. Often the concept of the sacred in the Plains religious context includes more than its agency, which is usually identified with specific powers, animals, or dream-spirits.

Power is also recognized as understanding and knowledge which are generally attributed to the elders of the community, particularly to elder ritualists or visionaries. Yet not all developed dreamers are beneficent in their use of power, and some might practice varying degrees of sorcery based on more dangerous or destructive dreams and visions. For example, Pawnee dreams given by a weasel or mole were believed to result in the dreamer's having an ability to harm others secretly.³⁸ While such powers could result in injuries to others, such visionary abilities are not always recorded as "evil" but as an adjunct to a wider array of powers, many of which could heal or harm. Such power is described as multi-valent and intrinsically variable; no dream-spirit is exclusively good or bad. This reflects the mysterious nature of the sacred and the complexity of its manifestations to individual visionaries. Power depends specifically on the individual's use and intention derived from vision experiences.

Conversely individuals who ignored or denied the power given to them could be killed by their dream-spirits, often through natural events, such as being struck by lightning or attacked by enemies or dangerous animals. For example, a woman who had received many Thunder dreams and refused to become a *Heyoka* was struck while sitting in her tipi and killed instantly. Her husband, who was also in the tipi, was not injured.³⁹ Because of the ambiguity of power, it is sometimes rejected. A visionary might decide that the power was too strong or dangerous and refuse to accept it.⁴⁰ Such a rejection is highly correlated with the spontaneous vision. The rejection of power from a spontaneous vision, regarded as a "free gift" of the dream-spirits, had fewer negative connotations than in visions received in the structured quest. Conscious fasting for a vision means a willingness to accept whatever is

given. However, even in the conscious fast, the visionary can be selective, accepting some aspects of the power and rejecting others. Results which failed to materialize when carrying out a vision, such as a vision-induced Mandan war party, could also result in the rejection of the dream-spirit if a member of the party was harmed or killed.⁴¹

COMMUNAL INTEGRATION

Having received the appropriate instructions in a successful vision, the visionary returns to the life of the community and must await the time of realizing the power. For the neophyte, this may be many years; for the experienced visionary, it is simply a matter of reflecting and acting on the vision. Another distinction of importance is the differential maturity and understanding that exists between advanced, elder visionaries and younger, less experienced dream seekers. Between these two extremes are a wide variety of visionaries with more or less developed understandings of religious and visionary matters.

This is a distinction well recognized by Plains peoples. Only an experienced and mature individual could possibly understand and act on the contents of a vision successfully. Prescriptive behaviors are part of a shared repertoire of symbolic actions that might take many, many years to master and develop. Effective action and enactment requires a high degree of symbolic understanding and a genuine knowledge of how to invoke and use visionary power. Acting on an original, primary vision might require many more visions or dreams before the full implications of the experiences are understood. While the visionary usually receives instructions, much in the vision might also be hidden or obscured.⁴² Reflecting on this content is an essential part of fully experiencing the potential of the vision, particularly for the mature visionary whose calling necessitates an increasingly effective expertise.

Having returned to the life of the community from the vision fast, the visionary brings

back a personalized experience of the holy. Sharing this experience is the final phase of the quest. The intentional structure is changed from the search for power to the task of expressing power for the social and religious validation of the vision. Only after the vision has been shared and positive results demonstrated will that content enter into the collective discourse. Sharing the dream or vision is highly non-verbal and participates in a broad semantic field of religious signs and symbolic actions. Communication is veiled in the visionary context. The translation of the experience into visible signs and acts involves the challenge of effectively communicating a mastery of the shared repertoire of symbolic forms shaped by other visionary members of the community. The problems of dream sharing are partially resolved in the use of traditionally recognized forms, color and designs which all encode meanings. In traditional Plains life, the ritual enactment is emphasized over verbal descriptions as the most effective means for the communication of a positive spiritual experience.

The translation of imagery into action is highly dramatic and aimed at a social validation of the vision. A verbal sharing of the dream is rare, and many visionaries preferred to keep silent as speaking about the dream is frequently regarded as tantamount to giving away its power.⁴³ The dream of the neophyte is the one most likely to be discussed, yet, among the Omahas, a young dreamer must wait four days before discussing a vision with a qualified interpreter.⁴⁴ More mature dreamers rarely communicate their dreams except in the context of secret dream societies to which they belong or to other, usually kin-related, respected dreamers. Dream knowledge is considered esoteric and inaccessible to the uninitiated. Further, some groups, like the Lakotas, might use a special visionary language, *hanbloglaka*, to refer to their dreams while concealing the actual contents of the vision.⁴⁵ Because visions tend to be directed toward specific results, the real communication of the vision is through a vivid enact-

ment which recapitulates the events of visionary encounter. The efficacy of a visionary enactment, such as a healing, success in war, or foretelling the outcome of distant events, is attributed to communication with particular dream-spirits. Enactment, patterned according to visionary experience in the context of shared symbols and behavior, leads to effective and meaningful results in which words play only a minimal symbolic role.

As a process, a dreamer's power can be enhanced by deeper understanding or further dreams and visions. While pointing toward a specific type of result, actualization is an ongoing process of self-development in the context of shared beliefs. Visionary experience enhances the vividness and richness of the communally shared worldview which in turn leads to greater personal empowerment. The vision can be unfolded and unpacked in ever deeper manifestations of power because manifestations of power reflect the inexhaustible potency of the sacred. As John Fire once commented on his own visionary experiences, "It took me a lifetime to find out."⁴⁶

Visions are not a stereotypical content that reflect a static view of culture but a dynamic and synergistic source of personal and communal empowerment and transformation. Following a vision might lead to wholly new or yet to be discovered forms of personal or communal behavior. Culture as process, as revealed through the visionary ethnography, requires a re-definition of the basic nature of the vision experience as central to traditional Plains Indian religious life. Not only do visions affirm the correctness of the religious worldview, they also amplify, amend and transform that world through visionary enactment.

DISCOURSE AND ENACTMENT

A limited number of verbal contexts can be delineated for dream sharing or dream-telling. They include between husband and wife, among close relatives, to a qualified shaman, to the sponsor of a ceremony, as a validation for curing the sick, when opening a bundle or

handling certain medicine objects, or when transferring or selling a dream or vision. For example, the Absarokee Two-Leggings was told of the vision experience of White Bear Child as a precedent for his own search for dream experience.⁴⁷ These patterns of verbalization are part of a larger religious context that provides a contextual frame for evaluating the significance of the vision. The religious context for dream-sharing is not a matter of a fixed corpus of rigidly defined beliefs or dogmatic ideas dependent on written texts. The interactive structures of discourse are part of a more spontaneous, interactive, and multifaceted exchange of creative ideas and experiences. Religious beliefs and personal visionary experiences form a larger field of shared interactive meanings, a web of related ideas, non-verbal images, acts, objects and artifacts, all of which provide a wider context for dream-sharing. The narrative structures of oral culture are also central to this broad dialogical context of personal and communal interpretation. Such dialogues take place through the sharing of stories and tales heard of other dream experiences, held in memory but not rigidly defined through a single authoritative synthesis, which further assists the dreamer in providing a richer context for dream interpretation.

Contradictory and divergent interpretations and meanings also exist. The stable features of any mythic world are those elements that reflect the shared religious environment and communally enacted ceremonial life. Vision quests are part of that ceremonial life and contribute considerable narrative content to communal discourse. Plains religion cannot be accurately described as a static, dogmatically uniform structure of beliefs or actions. Meaning is constantly being negotiated as part of a continual processing of religious experience in relationship to mythic narratives describing the inhabitants and their interactions within the religious world. This negotiation of meaning is structured through religious societies, cyclical ritual practices, kinship rela-

tions, and the frequency with which particular dream-spirits are invoked or encountered. The role of dreams and visions, then, in this process is to provide an experiential basis for cultural affirmation or for the introduction of transformative cultural practices in the context of religious experience. The visionary ethnography fully supports the thesis that dreams and visions are a primary means for the validation of cultural innovation. Visionary experiences become integrated into mythic narratives and serve as a validation for new practices and perspectives. In this sense, the Plains worldview must be seen as emergent and transformative, not as static or rigidly conventional.

The most archaic aspects of technical innovation in hunting and warfare as well as in healing, hunting and war practices have their roots in dreams and visions. For example, fire-making among the Sioux or the use of flint as a source for tool making among most Plains Indians, or the use of the *piskan* (buffalo-surround) among the Blackfeet are all attributed to dream origins of great antiquity.⁴⁸ The appearance of dream-spirits to the needy vision seeker developed and strengthened a worldview consistent with primary religious experiences. These foundational visions of others are remembered and passed through oral tradition into the religious lore of shared belief, forming an essential experiential core at the heart of Plains religious narratives. This is particularly true for sources of ritual enactments and healing, many of which derive from visions or dreams.⁴⁹

Such discourse serves an integrative function for vision experience and forms a coherent narrative basis for communal identity. Dreams and visions both confirm and elaborate this discourse, each contributing its own characteristic elements to the pattern of an emerging worldview. Visions both validate culture and serve to transform it through a process of sharing and interpretation. This is usually a gradual, subtle process that extends over generations and serves as a convergent

movement in the maintenance of communal identity. It allows for both variation and disagreement. In counterpoint, religious specialists insist that individuals who falsely attribute dream origins to social behavior endanger themselves and others. The primary means for the validation of the vision is not in its verbal congruency with other oral traditions but in the dramatic demonstration of its sacred character.

Another complementary aspect of enactment is the use of visionary imagery and the construction of sacred objects. Objects are an essential means for gaining power. They are constructed in imitation of the appearance and actions of the dream-spirit. They are a means for a direct contact with the source of empowerment, though the object is not a substitute for that power, only a perishable means for its invocation, and often called the "dwelling place" of a specific power.⁵⁰ For many Plains peoples, these objects could be replaced or renewed without losing their instrumentality. For example, among the Blackfoot, the song was seen as irreplaceable but the object used while singing could always be replaced.⁵¹ Such objects and symbols are mutually determined and participate in an interactive repertoire of shared symbolic forms.

An essential part of mythic discourse is the contribution made by the non-verbal imagery of visionary symbols and appearances. The painted lodge, body paint, and sacred objects, such as the pipe, the stone, the feather kept in the medicine bundle, or the sacred shield or hoop, all represent powerful images that shape an interactive meaning to religious discourse. The mythic structures of belief are enhanced through a vivid recreation of the vision in the context of shared imagery. As non-verbal components of communal expression, they represent a sacred art which is mysterious and dangerous if not handled correctly.⁵² Such objects as a medicine bundle hung on a tripod outside the owner's lodge or a painted tipi like one owned by the Cheyenne holy man, Old Spotted Wolf, that featured a great

snake around the base, forty-five buffalo cow heads, an owl, sun, crescent moon and a seven-star constellation—all contribute to the mythic nature of religious discourse.⁵³

The symbolic nature of these objects reveals that the object or image is an essential means for the communication of visionary experience. These symbols tend to function as unifying visible expressions of the visionary world, objects that symbolize the cosmos as an integrated whole. The various world strata are reflected in the use of color, design and form to express the complexity of the visionary world in a single object. The image serves to unify perception and organize the diversity of the world order into a meditative and powerful instrument of the dream-spirits.⁵⁴ Here culture is encoded in the form of a perishable object expressing an imperishable cultural truth about the holistic nature of the visionary experience.⁵⁵ In the vision experience of the individual, the image acts to organize thought and perception with regard to other types of religious activity and involvement. The image serves as a template that effects the perceptions of others and assists the individual by providing a visionary continuity with other non-verbal expressions of religious belief.

CONCLUSION

In many ways the sacred hoop of Black Elk's vision serves as an excellent example of a unifying image or metaphor that summarizes the role and significance of the vision in Plains Indian religions.⁵⁶ The vision is highly condensed and concentrated in its communication of power though it is often exceedingly rich in detail. Like the hoop, it has many implied and hidden meanings but as a single image it reflects the whole. The vision can be developed to express varied ends but always participates in the affirmation of the sacred. Like the hoop, it communicates the presence of the holy wherever it is used, painted or constructed. The vision offers views of the

world through a powerful emotional experience initiated by a sacred encounter that evokes the unity of the whole. Metaphorically, the hoop represents the whole but does not embody all possible manifestations of the whole. It is part of a shared repertoire of images, the significance of which cannot be limited to a single object or interpretation. The vision, like the hoop, captures the attention of the individual and directs it toward a mysterious power that cannot be fully articulated or analyzed—only symbolized and used. Each use of the symbol, like each vision, contributes to a variation that works to keep memory flexible and fluid in a context of intergenerational knowledge. While the vision may act to enhance a particular aspect of cultural memory, it also contains other aspects. The integrative function of the vision, like the hoop, is to provide a basis for cultural transformation in a context of creative innovation that contributes positively to the maintenance and transformation of cultural identity.

Every religious world offers a richness of action, experience and cultural construction which needs to be clearly apprehended and positively valued. As members of a global community, the development of mutual perceptions requires an increasing sensitivity and respect for the differences of other cultural values and practices. To respect the dreams and visions of others means to recognize the validity of entirely unique alternatives in human life and experience.⁵⁷ This valuation of human potential only enriches our own possibilities and allows for a world in which many worlds co-exist. The Plains visionary worldview offers an alternative perspective on dreaming and religious experience. It demonstrates an agency for cultural transformation through dreaming and a cultural aesthetics of religious communication. It is neither rigid nor formalistic, and it offers a blend of custom with creativity. It helps open minds to a wider spectrum of human experience, and it shows how variability and multivocality can function in the maintenance of communal coherence and change.

NOTES

1. For a review of the dominant theoretical perspectives in the interpretation of visions by non-native interpreters, see Lee Irwin, *The Dream-Seekers: Native American Visionary Traditions of the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1994).

2. Primary works on nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Plains visionary traditions include Patricia Albers and Seymour Parker, "The Plains Vision Experience," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 27 (Autumn 1971): 203-33; Ruth Benedict, "The Vision in Plains Culture," *American Anthropologist* 24 (January-March 1922): 1-23; Ruth Benedict "The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America," *American Anthropological Association Memoirs*, No. 29 (Menasha, Wisconsin: Banta Publishing Company, 1923); Joseph Epps Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973); John Fire and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972); George Horse Capture, *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge* (Ann Harbor: Bear Claw Press, 1980); David E. Jones, *Sanapia: Comanche Medicine Woman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972); Frank B. Linderman, *Plenty-Coups: Chief of the Crows* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1930); Walter McClintock, "Saítsiko, the Blackfoot Doctor," *The Masterkey* 15 (May 1941): 80-86; John R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980); Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the Southern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952); William Wildschut, *Crow Indian Medicine Bundles* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1960); Clark Wissler, "Ceremonial Bundles of the Blackfoot Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1912), 7: 65-298. The present article briefly summarizes a much more extensive analysis of the subject involving over 350 dreams collected from the visionary ethnography; see Irwin, *The Dream-Seekers* (note 1 above).

3. *Epistémé* means, generally, the underlying infrastructures or conceptual organizations by which the world is perceived and through which motivation and action are initiated. Thus an epistémé is a complex, culturally conditioned and learned organization of beliefs, actions and perceptions shared within a particular community of people and sanctioned through symbols, images, objects, appropriate behaviors and recognized modes of discourse. For a further discussion of epistémé, see J. G. Merquior, *Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

4. E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), pp. 87-89; see also Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe," *Bureau of American Ethnology, 27th Annual Report* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1911), p. 589.

5. Arthur Amiotte, "Our Other Selves: The Lakota Dream Experience," *Parabola* 7 (no. 2, 1982): 26. Amiotte, an outstanding Lakota artist, summarizes the interactive and transparent quality of the Plains religious world:

The mythologies of the tribes affirm for the Native the synchronous existence of various planes of reality in which both linear time and physical geography are only one level. . . . This capacity of the Native to sustain the mythological presence of the transparent world, to integrate sacred time and geography with the ordinary time and space, gives rise to a unique view of self in relation to all things.

6. Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 61 (Washington, D.C., 1918), p. 214.

7. Linderman, *Plenty-Coups* (note 2 above), pp. 63, 300-301; Robert Lowie, "The Assiniboine," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1909), 4: 48.

8. James Owen Dorsey, "A Study of Siouan Cults," *Bureau of American Ethnology, 11th Annual Report* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1890), p. 494.

9. The influence of Christianity has made a tremendous impact on the conceptualization of the "sacred" among many Plains peoples, but the actual ethnography of dreams shows little of this impact. While many have come to equivocate the "mysterious presence" with a Judeo-Christian God, the entire theology of western civilization is remarkably absent in actual dream records. Nevertheless, there is a degree of Christian symbolism and syncreticism in the texts. For example, see David G. Mandelbaum, "The Plains Cree," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1940), 37: 256; Alfred W. Bowers, *Hidatsa Social and Ceremonial Organization*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 194 (Washington, D.C., 1965), p. 311; Edward Goodbird, *Goodbird the Indian: His Story as Told to G. L. Wilson* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1985), p. 28.

10. For a more systematic overview of the way in which an individual shaman constructed a unified religious worldview, see Raymond J. DeMallie and R. H. Lavenda, "Wakan: Plains Siouan Concepts of Power," in *The Anthropology of Power: Ethnographic Studies from Asia, Oceania, and the New World*, ed. Raymond D. Fogelson and Richard N. Adams (New York: Academic Press, 1977). However, Plains ethnography seems to support the theory that systematic organization of a religious worldview was an *individual* (or possibly societal) accomplishment, and shamans within a single community might have highly divergent interpretations.

11. Fletcher and La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe" (note 4 above), pp. 597-99.

12. Howard Harrod, *Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), pp. 157-72.

13. Alanson Skinner, "Societies of the Iowa, Kansas, and Ponca Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1915), 11: 707.

14. Dorsey, "Siouan Cults" (note 8 above), p. 433; Goodbird, *Goodbird the Indian* (note 9 above), pp. 21-22; Paul Radin, "The Winnebago Tribe" *Bureau of American Ethnology, 37th Annual Report* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1916), p. 286; Fire and Erdoes, *Lame Deer* (note 2 above), pp. 155-56.

15. Fletcher and La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe" (note 4 above), pp. 129-31; George B. Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1923), 1: 80; Bowers, "Hidatsa" (note 9 above), p. 59.

16. Other references to the vision experiences of women are as follows: John M. Cooper, *The Gros Ventres of Montana: Religion and Ritual* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1957), pp. 273-74; Alfred Kroeber, "The Arapaho," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1904), 18: 434; Lowie, "The Assiniboine" (note 7 above); James W. Schultz, *Friends of My Life As An Indian* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), pp. 170-76; Grinnell, *The Cheyenne* (note 15 above), 2: 92-93; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches* (note 2 above), p. 168; Wilbur S. Nye, *Bad Medicine & Good: Tales of the Kiowas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 47; Skinner, "Societies" (note 13 above), p. 784; John R. Murie and Douglas R. Parks, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee*, Part 1 and 2, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology 27 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), pp. 156-57, 319.

17. Alfred W. Bowers, *Mandan Social and Ceremonial Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 175.

18. Robert Lowie, "The Tobacco Society of the Crow Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Part 2 (New York: The Trustees, 1919), 21: 182.

19. Bowers, *Mandan* (note 17 above), p. 175; Nye, *Bad Medicine* (note 16 above), p. 47.

20. Bowers, *Mandan* (note 17 above), p. 174.

21. Walker, *Lakota Belief* (note 2 above), p. 79.

22. Robert Lowie, "The Religion of the Crow Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1947), 25: 326; Cooper, *The Gros Ventre* (note 16 above), p. 277.

23. Walker, *Lakota Belief* (note 2 above), p. 85.

24. Ibid., 85; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches* (note 2 above), p. 157.

25. Wissler, "Ceremonial Bundles" (note 2 above), p. 104; Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (note 2 above), p. 58.

26. Unfortunately, the concept of injury or mortification is often referred to in the ethnography as "torture." This seems to be a particularly biased attitude toward what is for many Native Americans an experience of great courage, often regarded as highly honorable. Men with Sun Dance scars on their chest today are by no means ashamed of them and having them is often interpreted as a sign of spiritual accomplishment.

27. Wissler, "Ceremonial Bundles" (note 2 above), p. 104.

28. Walker, *Lakota Belief* (note 2 above), p. 152.

29. Cooper, *The Gros Ventre* (note 16 above), p. 278; Wissler, "Ceremonial Bundles" (note 2 above), p. 104.

30. Linderman, *Plenty-Coups* (note 2 above), pp. 36-42, 61-65, for an excellent and detailed example of Plenty Coups' visionary journeys through the sky and into the earth. 31. Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe: The Way of Life of the Pawnee* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), pp. 404-06.

32. The qualitative flow of visionary experience has been recognized as a constant feature of dreams in contemporary research. It was first noted by Allan Rechtschaffen, "The Single-Mindedness and Isolation of Dreams," *Sleep* 1: 1 (1978): 97-109, in his discussion of "single-mindedness" in dreams and the way in which dreams tend to have a low degree of awareness beyond the immediate dream context and have thematically similar content without the intrusion of alternative images and thoughts.

33. Walker, *Lakota Belief* (note 2 above), p. 86.

34. McClintock, "Saftisiko" (note 2 above), p. 85; the nature of Plains and Prairie songs and

their religious structure and content has been studied primarily by Francis Densmore in *Teton Sioux Music* (note 6 above) and in *The American Indians and Their Music* (New York: Woman's Press, 1926). For an extensive bibliography on Native American music and folklore, see William M. Clements and Frances M. Malpezzi, *Native American Folklore, 1879-1979: An Annotated Bibliography* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1984), pp. 28-32, plus index.

35. Kroeber, "The Arapaho" (note 16 above), p. 436.

36. Robert Lowie, "The Assiniboine" (note 7 above), p. 47.

37. Deward Walker, "Nez Perce Sorcery," *Ethnology* 6 (January 1967): 70.

38. Weltfish, *The Lost Universe* (note 31 above), p. 406.

39. Wilson D. Wallis, "The Canadian Dakota," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1947), 41: 82. A Heyoka is a Thunder dreamer and a central participant in the ceremony to enact a Thunder-being vision. See Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 105.

40. Cooper, *The Gros Ventre* (note 16 above), pp. 266-67; Kroeber, "The Arapaho" (note 16 above), p. 434.

41. Bowers, *Mandan* (note 17 above), p. 170.

42. Walker, *Lakota Belief* (note 2 above), pp. 134-35.

43. Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 126; Frances Densmore, *The Belief of the Indian in a Connection Between Song and the Supernatural*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 151 (Washington, D.C., 1953), p. 220.

44. Fletcher and La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe" (note 4 above), p. 131.

45. Walker, *Lakota Belief* (note 2 above), p. 94; Stephen R. Riggs, *Dakota Grammar, Texts, and Ethnography* (Washington: Department of the Interior, U.S. Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region, 1893), p. 166. Further work has been done by William Powers, *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), p. 25, in which he discusses differences between several variations in sacred language as used by a Sioux shaman.

46. Fire and Erdoes, *Lame Deer* (note 2 above), p. 137.

47. Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), p. 24.

48. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* (note 43 above), p. 311; Schultz, *My Life* (note 16 above), pp. 26-28, 184.

49. Walker, *Lakota Belief* (note 2 above), p. 260.

50. Goodbird, *Goodbird the Indian* (note 9 above), p. 23; Nabokov, *Two Leggings* (note 47 above), p. 25.

51. Wissler, "Ceremonial Bundles" (note 2 above), p. 104.

52. Dorsey, "Souian Cults" (note 8 above), pp. 395-96.

53. Grinnell, *The Cheyenne* (note 15 above), 1: 234.

54. The repertoire of Plains religious objects which symbolize the unitary structure of the religious world are particularly expressed by the painted lodge. See John Ewers, *Murals in the Round: Painted Tipis of the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache Indians*

(Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978); for the war shield, see Wissler, "Ceremonial Bundles" (note 2 above); for medicine bundles, see Wissler, "Some Protective Designs of the Dakota," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: The Trustees, 1907), 1: 21-53; and for the sacred pipe, see Jordan Paper, *Offering Smoke: The Sacred Pipe and Native American Religion* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1988).

55. Anna T. Dolan, "Eidetics: Unexpurgated and Unshackled," *Journal of Mental Imagery* 6: 1 (1982): 43.

56. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* (note 43 above), p. 129.

57. Stanley Krippner, "Dreams and the Development of a Personal Mythology," *Journal of Mind and Behavior* 7: 3 (1986): 449-61.