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Review of Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota

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Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota. By Wallace Black Elk and William S. Lyon. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990. Preface, glossary. xxiv + 193 pp. \$16.95.

This book supports the basic presupposition that Native American religion has always been the expression of an individual point of view. Endemic to the Sioux religious tradition, the *Wicasa Wakan*, "holy man" or shaman, has struggled over the last 150 years to preserve a religious heritage that has undergone continuous development and modification. Yet, at the core of that heritage, it has been the personal religious experiences and abilities of the shaman that have acted as the authenticating touchstone of belief. In the same spirit that chainsaws are preferred over stone axes, contemporary Sioux shamans have been challenged to articulate a religious orientation that is fully attuned to life in the late twentieth century. This book is a step in that direction, and, in a sense, represents a marker on the way toward reformulated spiritual activity that can no longer look back to the nineteenth century for its religious standards.

Plains shamanism as an active, contemporary tradition is highly idiosyncratic and has been personalized through experiences no longer confined to reservation life. Wallace Black Elk (not a direct relative of his famous "grandfather," Nicholas Black Elk) epitomizes the emerging vision of the Sioux holy man. A proponent of the "shadow lodge," a variant of the *Yuwipi*, he is a shaman whose ability to communicate with the *Wakanapi* "sacred beings" was initiated at the early age of five. Returning from four years of active service in World War II, he underwent a religious awakening and was determined to revitalize the centrality and importance of the Chanunpa (*Candahuṣa Wakan*) "spirit pipe" so crucial to most Sioux rites. Like his Sioux predecessors, Wallace Black Elk has a distinctly personal vision of his role as intermediary between human beings and the *Wakanapi* and the book abounds in personal visionary experiences and narratives given as testimonials to their efficacy and power.

The original text was recorded on tape by William Lyon, in English, and then selectively edited to form thematic chapters and a coherent narrative. This leaves the finished work a bit choppy in sections, but the reader gains a definite sense of the unique oratorical flow and the mind-set that is so characteristic of many Native American speakers. Central to the entire work is the Chanunpa and the many ways in which the pipe serves to both protect the visionary and to solicit spiritual aid from *Tunkashila*, the highest power. At sixty-eight years of age, Wallace Black Elk has a thorough grasp of the unique role and symbolism of the sacred pipe in the context of the Sun Dance, the vision quest, and the sweat-lodge. He is an outspoken critic of drugs and alcohol and a proponent of the four virtues of courage, patience, endurance, and alertness that he regards as essential for successfully receiving guidance from the *Wakanapi*. The book also contains a number of apocalyptic narratives. Like the Ghost Dance shamans before him, he believes that contemporary civilization is on the knife-edge of disasters that can only be avoided by a renewal

of spiritual power that fully respects the shaman's path.

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