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## Review of *Lakota Society* By James R. Walker

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*Lakota Society*. By James R. Walker. Edited by Raymond J. DeMallie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. Photographs, illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. xvi + 207 pp. \$19.95.

This volume contains a hodgepodge of personal writings and field notes by a physician who served at Pine Ridge Agency soon after the establishment of a reservation for Oglalas in western South Dakota. Without formal preparation, James R. Walker recorded (between 1896 and 1914) what he perceived from observations and collected from informants. Guided by published materials on the same general subject, Raymond DeMallie has strung them together on a thin editorial thread. Together, the meagerly trained researcher from a previous era and an anthropologist who has served on the faculty of Indiana University in recent years have produced a worthy addition to the body of literature published over three centuries about the "traditional" political structures, social organizations, and folkways of western Sioux tribes.

Little if anything new is offered the reader who has surveyed the literature and made

frequent social contact with Sioux people. Old-timers born in Walker's era continue to transmit most of the same information to younger generations through ceremonial and social orations. Spiritual and cultural leaders still practice, demonstrate, and expound on many of the principles today. Hence, careful general readers and observers will not be enlightened by this book.

Prospective readers who have little familiarity with subjects covered in *Lakota Society* should by no means regard this as the "final word." It is oral testimony in manuscript embellished by the observations of an outsider who happened to be there. Although Walker was not formally trained for this work, he was sensitive, apparently honest, and manifestly precise in recording truth as he perceived it at the time. But there were many variables: differing levels of expertise among informants, dramatically changing times that affected informants' perceptions of the past, Walker's own increasing capacity to understand, and variations in cultural practices from band to band and tribe to tribe. Doubtless there are strong elements of truth in all of the fragments, but there are also highly questionable dimensions to the whole story they relate. The general reader is advised to digest this material along with other sources—some of which the editor has mentioned in his text—and realize that conclusions drawn by most chroniclers of cultural practices in history are somewhat tenuous.

Historiographers should be especially careful of the work for this reason. The variables mentioned above—especially Walker's increasing capacity to interpret the signals he received—become important factors in evaluation. DeMallie's limited perspective as a cultural anthropologist is important, too. Compared to some veterans of his discipline, he seems to possess a narrow grasp of appropriate historical context for the material, is fairly insensitive to the inevitability of change over time, and makes no comment regarding the place of oral testimony and personal observation among the various information-seeking methods used in the reconstruction of history. These two important

ways of gathering information must be employed and assessed together with others. Historiographers should be aware of these problems; they will surely include it among noteworthy works but will by no means regard it as the culmination or even a substantial refinement of other Sioux culture studies.

Walker will be remembered as a figure of moderate importance. Perhaps he will fit in a group that includes James Owen Dorsey and Alice Fletcher, for example, but he will not rank with observers such as Thomas and John P. Williamson, Stephen Return and Alfred Riggs, or Frances Densmore. It is unfortunate that DeMallie failed to discuss this aspect with his readers.

He has rendered them an important service, nevertheless. Those who touch literature of this type superficially will grow and enjoy the product of his effort. Scholars will receive it as a welcome addition. Indian people should read its contents with interest and enjoy many debates regarding the authenticity of the individual authors. Librarians should regard it as a necessary acquisition in the service of these several constituencies.

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