

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

August 1991

## Review of *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing*, by Thomas H. Lewis

Elizabeth S. Grobsmith

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, Liz.Grobsmith@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Grobsmith, Elizabeth S., "Review of *The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing*, by Thomas H. Lewis" (1991). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 34.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/34>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

observes that communities that openly accept and externalize conflict are the most successful in controlling their own destinies. Their experience may provide a valuable lesson for the sustainable agriculture movement.

**David R. Lighthall**, *Department of Geography, University of Iowa.*

**The Medicine Men: Oglala Sioux Ceremony and Healing.** Thomas H. Lewis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. Notes, Bibliography, index, and illustrations. 219 pages. \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0-8032-2890-2).

Lewis' new book on Oglala ceremony and healing brings together observations and interpretations of his encounters with Lakota healers from the Pine Ridge Reservation during his stay there in the 1960s and 1970s. Lewis was readily incorporated into the community and entrusted with details of conceptions and sources of power which reflect both the relaxed political and social climate and the attitude of openness the Lakota then held about sharing knowledge of their traditions with outsiders. This is fortunate, both for Lewis and the reader, for much of the substance of what Lewis learned is fast disappearing as are the elders who possess such knowledge. The post-militancy period today discourages ethnographers from inquiring into such spiritual matters and, when they do, this hesitancy rightfully inhibits their willingness to write about and publish such data. Lewis returned to Pine Ridge in the late 1980s to recheck his data and ultimately published his observations. It is well that he did, for Lewis has provided invaluable documentation of many aspects of Lakota healing and belief, among them, *yuwipi*, bear and eagle power, the Horse Dance, Sun Dance, ghost power and the *heyoka* cult, and the more contemporary styles of religious worship, including peyotism and Christian evangelism. Lewis also devotes considerable attention to herbalism and the uses of plants in native medicine.

Lewis' book is one of great contrasts. It is comprised of many subparts, some sections having been published in thirteen other places. The desire to bring his years of exploration under one cover results in an unevenness that seriously detracts from the beautifully written analytic passages on Oglala practitioners and their philosophies. Lewis' anecdotal overviews of Pine Ridge—for example, of the school, tribal council, the courts—are so sketchy and incomplete that they do little but affirm stereotypes of the poverty and hopelessness of reservation life. The early sections of the book appear as a potpourri of Lakota ideology. Many of his observations of the commercialism of the Sun Dance—for example, the mixing in of powwows and rodeos during a Sun Dance ceremony—may

have been valid for the period in which they were made, but the inexperienced reader could be easily misled into thinking that those attitudes continue to be typical of today. They are not. Lewis' description of the 1967 Sun Dance at Pine Ridge is probably the sketchiest of his vignettes, and while the anecdotes may be accurate portrayals of the events he observed, the reader unfamiliar with such rituals should be cautioned not to draw generalizations or inferences from his nearly too bold characterization.

Because Lewis is a psychiatrist who is basically recording memoirs of his days in the field, his book initially suffers in the presentation from its lack of systematic study and, at best, appears as passing commentary of an extremely limited nature with little substance. At worst, this sometimes results in incomplete and misleading analyses. Of even greater concern is his unabashed self-insertion into healing practices, as when he sponsors a *yuwipi* healing ceremony for the sole purpose of writing about it. When asked during the ceremony about his reasons for requesting the meeting, he replies:

Startled at being asked for a public statement, I could think of no plausible illness or problem. With a new appointment in mind, I said, 'I have a new and difficult job to do. I do not know if I can do it well. I would like to know if I can' (p. 84).

Without shame, Lewis also reveals (as he has done in his writing elsewhere) that the *yuwipi* spirits which are summoned to a meeting are nothing but sparks, flicks of a lighter with no fluid. Some would dispute the right of any outsider to make such comments. Lewis tries to dispel notions of romanticism and mysticism concerning individuals' religious participation, which is reasonable, but sometimes goes to the opposite extreme, in describing Sun Dancers as "hypnotic automatons" (p. 64) or taking on "an air of tiredness and disinterest" (p. 57). Anthropologists might question the advisability of such statements and might weigh the feelings of disrespect such comments convey against any real insights offered into Lakota ritual.

These limitations aside, once Lewis sets aside his personal sketches and gets on with the real purpose of the book—to share the extremely rich knowledge of healing gained from his informants—the book becomes a powerful and important ethnographic resource. His discussion of the *heyoka* is rich and informative, his characterization of the Lakota culture-bound *wacinko* syndrome and its relationship to western healing perception, and his discussion of the dynamics of the relationship between healer and client insightful, thoughtful and eloquent. Lewis draws his discussion

to a close with comparisons of Lakota healers with other shamans, and recounts the evolution of the role of the traditional medicine man from the indigenous healer to the new role of mediator and "pastoral counselor."

Overall, the book's contribution lies in its intense and probing exploration of the Oglala Lakota healers' knowledge of the cosmos and rituals required to manipulate the universe. These data are a rich, historical resource and will be increasingly valued as sources disappear from our grasp. Elizabeth S. Grobsmith, *Department of Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.

**The Wild Oat Inflorescence and Seed: Anatomy, Development and Morphology.** By M. V. S. Raju. Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1990. Illustrations, references, and figures. xv + 183 pp. \$25.00 paper (ISBN 0-88977-062-X).

This slim volume describes a detailed study of the reproductive parts of *Avena fatua*, the wild oat plant—a common weed in the northern plains and the probable ancestor of the cultivated oat. The book integrates the author's own work with information from available literature and includes lengthy technical descriptions of the structure and the growth of the inflorescence, the floret, the ovule, the pollen grain, the embryo, the seed, and the young seedling. Throughout the work, the author relates the wild oat's structure and development to other grasses, other monocotyledons, and other seed plants, offering evolutionary interpretations of many of the features observed. He places particular emphasis on the relationship of structure to the onset and breaking of seed dormancy.

In many cases Raju offers evidence that traditional views about the relationship of parts in grasses may be wrong. For example, the grass floret is usually regarded as small flower enclosed by two floral bracts, the lemma and the palea; this flower is considered to be essentially naked, its perianth (sepals and petals) represented only by two tiny structures, the lodicules, which function in opening the floret. Raju, however, finds evidence in wild oats of tiny floral bracts which form just below the florets but do not persist in development, and he interprets the lemma and palea not as bracts but as remnants of a three-parted perianth (three-parted because the palea originates from two separate primordia). He suggests that the lodicules represent an outer whorl of three stamens, one stamen having been lost and two greatly reduced and modified. Thus in Raju's opinion the "floret" of the wild oat can be considered a flower, whereas the traditional view regarded it as a flower enveloped within bracts.