

# **The Unlikely Associates: A Study in Oglala Sioux Magic and Metaphysic**

by  
**Joseph Epes Brown**

*Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 1 & 2 (Winter-Spring, 1983)  
© World Wisdom, Inc.

[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com)

*Editor's note: This essay had also appeared earlier in Studies,  
in the Summer 1970 edition. The two versions are identical.*

Although Clark Wissler, the eminent American anthropologist, called the trait "...vague and naïve like most primitive ideas", we are nevertheless grateful to him for initially calling attention to the Oglala Sioux's<sup>1</sup> mysterious concern with the Whirlwind and the Elk.<sup>2</sup> As Wissler has skillfully pointed out, the concept in fact is not restricted to the elk and the wind in the Oglala mind, but embraces a whole series of unlikely associates, among whom are the bison and bear, the dragonfly, the moth, the cocoon and the spider, and possibly more. That a people's cognitive orientation allows them to conceive of a perfectly "logical" interconnection between such seemingly disparate phenomena, understandably lends credence in the minds of many to the "pre-logical mentality" theories of former times. It is proposed, however, to reexamine this problem initially exposed by Wissler, and to do this, so far as it is possible, through the conceptual categories of the Oglala himself, and thus attempt to see his world as he conceives it.<sup>3</sup> In this process it is hoped to be able to clarify the special nature of Oglala magic, and its underlying metaphysical basis.

---

1. The Oglala are a subdivision of the Western Teton Dakota, who speaks Lakota, a dialect of a large family of languages known as Siouan. Most of the present-day Oglala live on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

2. Wissler (1905: 258). Wissler is not alone in this opinion of the Indian's concepts, for even Alice Fletcher, who similarly worked among the Sioux, evaluates parallel Oglala formulations as "... the cry of a child rather than the articulate speech of a man", for in their minds "... the life of the universe has not been analyzed, classified, and a great synthesis formed of the parts". (1883: 276, note). Francis La Flesche, an Omaha, offers apt commentary to these types of statements: "The myths, the rituals, and the legends of the race have been frequently recorded in such a manner as to obscure their true meaning, and to make them appear as childish or as foolish". (1905: 269-270).

3. Had Wissler framed his data within the more holistic context of Oglala conceptualizations, which he actually could have done, he may not have concluded that the concepts were as vague and naïve as he has stated.

Since the connecting concept underlying the disparate associates referred to is the wind, or “Whirlwind”, understood in the special manner to be described below, it will be appropriate to commence the analysis with the cocoon. For, it is from the cocoon that there emerges, in a manner undoubtedly as mysterious to the non-Indian as to the Indian, the fluttering butterfly or moth. The cocoon for the Indian, therefore “... is regarded as the bundle or mysterious object from which a power similar to that of the Whirlwind emanates”.<sup>4</sup> The moth is thus conceived as similar to the whirlwind due to the “logical” fact that the moth may be no more contained than may the wind; there was thus believed to be “... a deep mystery in the wind, since it was intangible and visible only in its effects”.<sup>5</sup> Further evidence of identity of this form with the “formless” wind are the fluttering actions of the wings which themselves are wind-producing, a trait possessed by other winged forms, such as the dragonfly, which therefore must also have access to whirlwind power. The mystery of the relationship is concretized and thus intensified for the Oglala, through actual possession of a cocoon which was “... often taken with a portion of the twig or surface upon which it was found, wrapped in an Eagle plume, or down, and worn on the head. This was regarded as a perpetual prayer to the power of the whirlwind”.<sup>6</sup> Further, cocoons were carved in wood by the Sioux; models of cocoons were made from buckskin, and graphic designs are frequently found.<sup>7</sup> The Sioux “feathered” sun symbol, for example, as illustrated on the cover of this Journal, utilizes a repetition of stylized designs representing both feathers (or plumes) and cocoons; for feathers have control over the winds and it is the wind power which is believed to be encapsulated in the cocoon. These beliefs add especially important dimensions to an understanding of the total symbol, which in all its referents aptly expresses a presiding concern of the Oglala for synthesis and ultimate unification of the multiple.

The cocoon-encapsulated whirlwind power<sup>8</sup> is conceived to be of value to a warrior and a hunter, since through processes labeled with unkind connotations as “imitative magic”, the individual himself seeks to become “... intangible, invisible, and destructive like the wind”.<sup>9</sup> Having such power, the man too would be as difficult to hit as the butterfly, or as the dragonfly whom he “...venerated as being possessed of the power to escape a blow. They say it cannot be hit by man or animal, neither can the Thunder injure it. Hence this dragonfly is also in touch with a power the Indian covets”.<sup>10</sup>

---

4. Wissler (1905: 258).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 259.

7. Note that a cocoon-whirlwind design was used by Whirlwind Bear in drawing the pictograph of his personal name. Cf. Mallory (1893: 604, fig. 962).

8. It is of interest to note the mythological affirmation of the cocoon-whirlwind relationship, in the especially close association between the Whirlwind (*Umi*), “unborn” little brother of the Four Winds, and *Whopi*, the beautiful providing and all-embracing Earth Principle, who was married to the South Wind. Cf. Walker (1917: 169-170).

9. Wissler (1905: 258).

10. Ibid., 261. Among the Cheyenne Indians too, the Dragonfly was “... called whirlwind—because it makes a little whirlwind though it is not seen in the whirlwind, only the dust being visible—will make the

As is typical in Oglala conceptualizations, there is also inherent to these beliefs a positive-negative polarity. The negative pole to the Whirlwind power, no doubt suggested to the minds of the people by the Whirlwind's "playful" twisting movements, is its power to produce confusion of the mind".<sup>11</sup> But in conformity with typical Oglala patterns of thought, the minds to be confused are those of the enemy, so that to this end the Whirlwind in the cocoon is invoked to work its power<sup>12</sup>; in this manner, and again in accord with typical Oglala thought processes, the "negative" is transformed to the positive advantage of the initiating agent. This point is of special importance in evaluating the quality of Oglala magical beliefs, since, unlike more gross forms of magic which may work through witchcraft for destruction of the opponent through a kind of remote control, here the power is rather directed so that the initiator may have "protective freedom" for the direct encounter which he seeks.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, without such direct and personal contact with the opponent no merit may accrue.

Another member to be added to this strange assembly of cocoon, moth, dragonfly, and butterfly, is the bison and even tangentially the bear. As with most Oglala conceptions, those concerning the bison are based on careful and pragmatic observation. It has been observed, for example, that in winter when a bison cow drops a calf, she is able to blow out from her nose and mouth a red filmy substance which envelops and protects the calf, just as the cocoon protects the developing moth.<sup>14</sup> The imagination of the Oglala has also been stimulated by the trait of the bison bull, who "... paws the earth, every now and then deftly scooping up the dust with his hoof and driving it straight up into the air... the buffalo is praying to the power of the whirlwind to give him power over his enemies"<sup>15</sup> Graphic illustration of this affinity with Whirlwind power has been noted on a Gros Ventre ornament where a line is seen connecting the horn of a bison to an insect, explanation being given that this represents "... a rapport between the buffalo and the moth... these were two great powers and... they were in sympathy with each other."<sup>16</sup> A double function, from the Oglala's point of view, may be seen to be operative in this dust-throwing trait, for it may also be used to lure bison cows away from the herd during the rutting season; this

---

man wearing it hard to see and hard to hit. Neither of these creatures is ever long motionless. Both typify swiftness and activity, and give the wearer ability to move about swiftly, and to escape bullets and arrows". Grinnell (1962: 112, Vol. I). Grinnell has noted that the famous warrior, Roman Nose, had dragon-flies painted all down the strips of buffalo hide that supported the feathers of his bonnet.

11. Wissler, *loc. cit.*, 250.

12. "The protection or aid of the whirlwind (to confuse the mind of the enemy) was secured by prayers and these prayers were symbolized by the cocoon worn upon the person, by its image in stuffed buckskin, or by its graphic representation, sketched or painted." Wissler (1902: 44).

13. The same principle applies with the use of "vision" or "dream" animals painted upon the shields of warriors, where again their power operates to protect the bearer, giving him advantage for *his* direct actions in relation to the enemy. Cf. Wissler (1907: 53).

14. Cf. Brown (1953: 122), where this trait is duplicated by a medicine-man in a ceremony for the benefit of a girl who is now becoming a young woman.

15. Wissler (1905: 258-9). The bear also is said by the Oglala to possess power to confuse the enemy, but no documentation in explanation of this concept is known to the author.

16. Wissler, *ibid.*, 258.

attracting power-quality is regarded as especially *wakan* (“mysterious”/“sacred”) since among bison it is normally the cow who acts as leader of herds.<sup>17</sup> Similar power over women was especially sought after by young Oglala males, as will be especially evident in the conceptions to be described below relating to the elk.

The spider is conceived to be associated with the other beings of our mixed assembly, again through association with the winds. A natural phenomena underlying this concept is the trait, which most certainly has been observed by the Oglala, for the young of certain spiders to send out long filaments which are caught by the wind and which carry these young beings for long distances. Further concrete expression for the Oglala of this wind-relationship is found in the observed fact that at least certain types of spiders lay out their webs on the ground in rectangular shape with the four corners extended towards the four directions of space.<sup>18</sup> Representation of this form is found repeatedly in Oglala art forms, which often have on the border of the design wavy lines representing the power of the Thunders.<sup>19</sup> Blish, *inter alios*, thus mentions in her study on the Oglala Sacred Bow the “... association of the spider with the thunder... i.e. with the higher powers, powers that can protect and strengthen”.<sup>20</sup> These associations may only be understood within the larger context of Oglala mythological belief, where it is found that the four directions of space are identified with the “homes” of the four winds, and these winds and their appointed directions are under the control of Thunder-beings.<sup>21</sup>

The Oglala’s magical and “practical” applications of these forms and conceptions are based in the fact that the spider’s web cannot be destroyed by bullets or arrows, for they pass through without leaving a hole, and further that as a “friend” of the Thunder the spider or his web has power to protect from harm.<sup>22</sup> The application of these principles are made especially specific in the Oglala’s trait of stringing up a web-like hammock between four trees upon which a young child is placed, for “... this is to bring good fortune to the child”.<sup>23</sup> Also, since spider is conceived

---

17. Many aspects of bison herd behavior actually express a kind of matriarchal society. Cf. Seton (1910: Vol. I).

18. This form also seems to have been used to represent the heavens, for this web-design corresponds very closely to the old style Oglala method of representing stars. Cf. Wissler (1907: 49 and 52, fig. 25); (1904: 26, and Plate VI). This web of the heavens is also almost identical in form to depictions of the “*U-ma-ne*”, or sacred altar, scraped into the ground and used for all rites and ceremonies. Cf. Fletcher (1884: 289, note) for reference to this “...unappropriated life or power of the earth”.

19. This lightning form is “... a symbol of the supernatural power behind the symbolic ideas expressed”. Wissler (1904: 249); for illustrations see also in this work page 248, fig. 85.

20. Blish (1934: 185).

21. Cf. Walker (1917: 83 ff.).

22. The author is not sure if it is folklore or science, but belief exists that spiders are especially attracted to places which have been hit by lightning.

23. Wissler (1907: 50).

as a particularly cunning and industrious being<sup>24</sup>—the latter trait being especially desirable in women—and since his nets have the capacity to ensnare,<sup>25</sup> it is conceived that this power may be drawn upon by the men for attracting women to them. It has thus been recorded that a “courting robe” of bison hide was painted with figures of the spider, along with the Whirlwind and Elk, and this robe was so manipulated that the desired girl would step upon the design and thereby be ensnared. It is further noted that the operation of this imitative magic may further be strengthened by the owner of the robe carrying a dead spider in his mouth.<sup>26</sup>

The final member to be treated in this assembly of unlikely associates, is the elk whose operating powers are clearly depicted in the accompanying plates which provide an illustrative summary to major dimensions of the quasi-magical principles which have been referred to in this study.<sup>27</sup>

The dominant role played by the Elk in Oglala conceptions, and in those of the Plains peoples generally, should first be noted. Indication of such strong emphasis is provided in the explicit references to a “hypothetical”, supernatural, Elk.<sup>28</sup> Reference to, or representation of, such “spirit” animals is indicated through the lack of a heart, or rather, space is depicted where the heart of the animal or bird should be. “The conception seems to be, that an animal without a heart is immortal and supernatural<sup>29</sup>; at least this is the way in which the mythical Elk was described. According to the belief, there is a connection between this opening through the heart and the center of the medicine-hoop, represented in the elk ceremonies by the mirror”.<sup>30</sup> Such belief complexes are undoubtedly associated with the rites of the Oglala Elk “Festival”, where an elk is painted over the door of the ceremonial tipi in such a manner that all who enter must pass

---

24. “The spider was also regarded as a power in influencing women because of his cunning”. Wissler (1905: 262). Belief in the spider’s cunning is well founded, for they may appear to walk in the air, and it was seen that the young do “fly”; spiders may crawl “under the ground”, some “spiders” may even walk on water, and they create their web (the “heavens”) from a substance from their very bodies. Even naturalists have been impressed by the ability of the spider, for example, to use a ball and windlass technique to lift objects off the ground, even those as heavy as snakes and mice. Cf. E. W. Gudger (1925: 261-275).

25. It has been observed by the author that the silk threads leading to the center of circular spider webs are of smooth quality, whereas those that are in concentric circles are sticky. This potential symbolism would fit perfectly with Oglala conceptions relating to the Center in relation to a periphery, but it is not known to the author if this quality of the web was known to these people.

26. Wissler (1905: 267).

27. Cf. Plates A, B, and C, and the page preceding these illustrations for explanations of the drawings.

28. Cf. Wissler, *ibid.*, 262.

29. This fact sheds light on the often misunderstood Sioux personal name “No Heart”.

30. Wissler (1907: 43). Cf. Plates A and B. Such representations of the “no-heart” have been especially noted in depictions of Eagles as Thunder-beings. Cf. the illustrations of paintings on the Sioux Sacred Pipe tipi as depicted in Weygold (1903).

through the very body of the animal.<sup>31</sup>

The characteristics of the phenomenal elk, utilized by the Oglala for his own magical activities, are essentially based on the mysterious power of the bull to attract cows to him through his whistling call, or “bugle”, which again represents control over the air or Wind principle.<sup>32</sup> The bull elk is therefore “... taken as the incarnation of the power over females,”<sup>33</sup> which again is a trait sought for by the men. The man’s further attempt to identify with such power is made through the simulated call of the bull elk through the use of the flageolet,<sup>34</sup> which is thought to draw irresistibly the young women of the camp to the man playing the instrument.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

The three sets of drawings which appear on the following pages have been reproduced from very small plates of inferior quality which originally appeared in Clark Wissler’s article on Oglala Societies, printed in the *Anthropological Papers* of the American Museum of Natural History (1912). The original drawings, probably made by an Oglala Sioux, are in the collection of R. Cronau. The author expresses his gratitude to Ann Parker for her skilful and faithful reproduction of these fine Indian drawings.

---

31. Fletcher (1883: 282). Reinforcing these multiple expressions of a common theme, is the legend, depicting the only Sioux skeptic known to the author, of the youth who tells his father that nothing is sacred, and that we by our own will control the destiny of things, a point of view denied by the father who insists that all things are *wakan*. The youth then tries again and again to kill an elk, but first his rock turns to fluff, and then his arrow acts as if it were bird-down, until finally the elk replies: “It is not good that man tries to own those walking on earth who live”. Boas and Deloria (1941: 176-178).

32. Cf. Plate B.

33. Wissler (1905: 261).

34. Such Plains “love flutes” frequently, and appropriately, have carved upon them the figure of the elk.

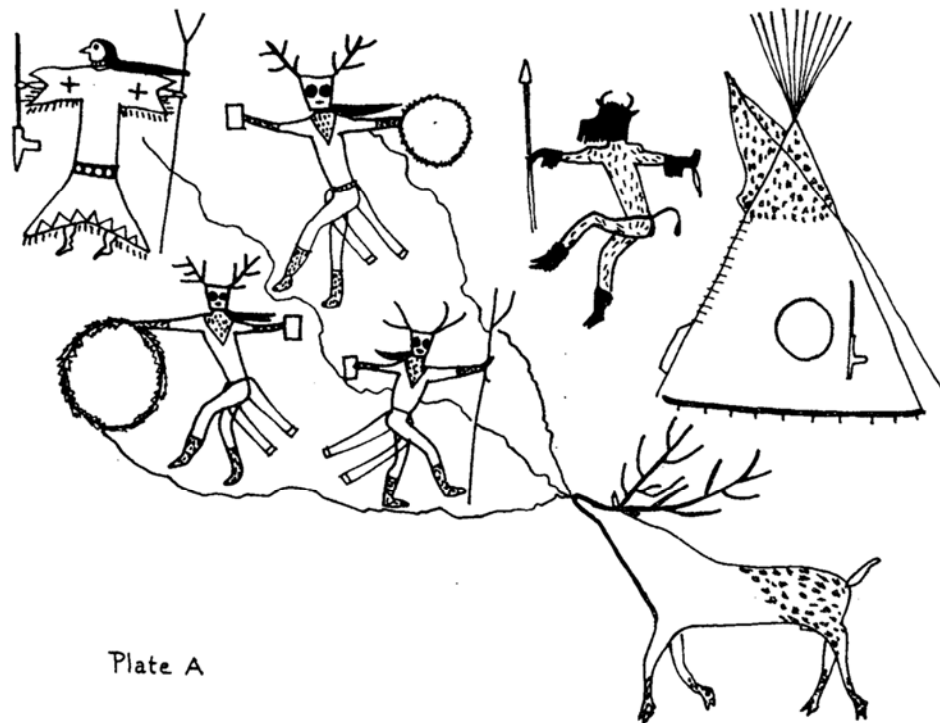


Plate A

This drawing represents the ceremonial dance of the “Elk Dreamer’s Society”, and depicts their magical affiliation with the Elk’s power. Only the two dancers belong to the Buffalo and the Black Tail Deer Cult respectively. The fact that the woman holding the pipe also has a forked stick, and is connected to the Black Tail Deer dancer with the power –line issuing from the Elk, suggests that she may be the mythical “Two-Face” or “Double Woman.”

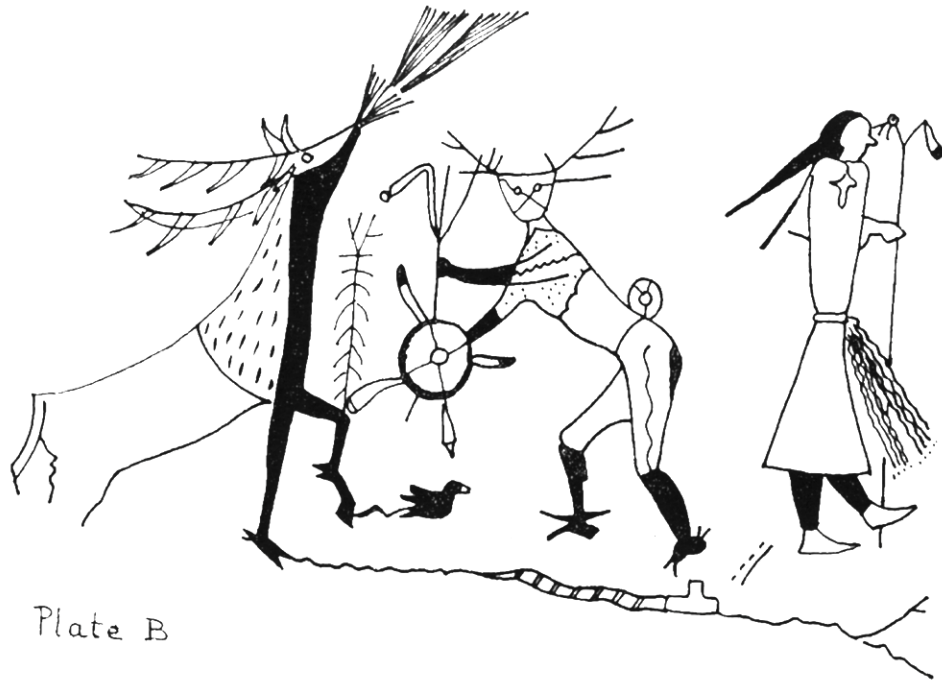


Plate B.

In this detail from an Elk Dance, the breath-whistle ("bugle") of the Elk is depicted. The hoops carried and supported by the dancer have circular mirrors (the Elk's "heart") supported by spider webs. Note the presence of the Pipe depicted in both this plate and Plate A. This presence of the Pipe is undoubtedly due in part to the symbolical breath-wind principle involved in the rite of smoking. The mysterious association of a black bird (raven?) with the Elk's foot is not clear to the author.

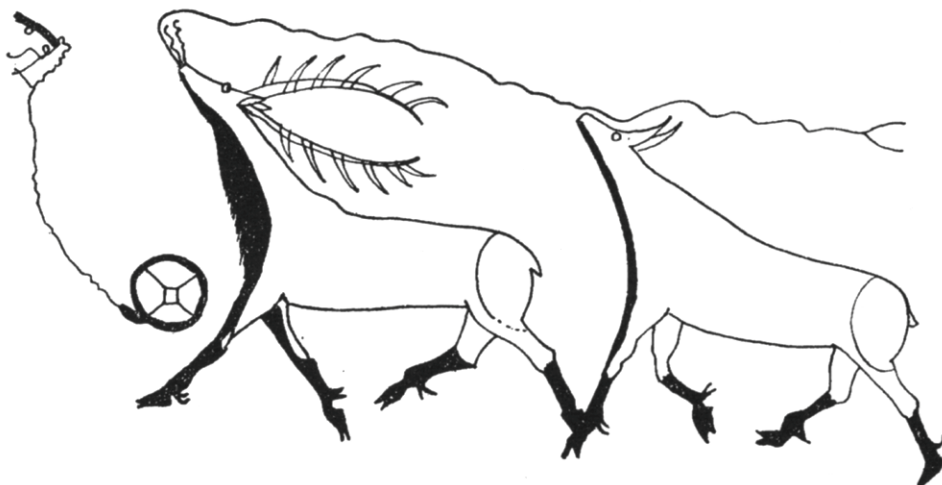


Plate C.

This drawing represents the mystical power of the bull Elk over the cow; the presence of the



“Elk Hoop” and central mirror is again noted.

The Oglala’s recognition, and attempted utilization, of the quality of power which has been evidenced for him in the moth-like insects, the bison, the bear, the spider, and now the elk, clearly involve psychological processes which are within the realm of imitative, and most often, ceremonial magic. Such magical procedures are nevertheless “innocent” in the sense that when applied to patterns of warfare, for example, they are not projected for the direct harm or destruction of the enemy, but rather they allow the individual himself to have freedom—as the moth escaping from the cocoon—and be protected for the accomplishment of his own aggressive acts. The magic involved, therefore, is “white” rather than “black”, and indeed the latter is very rarely utilized by the Oglala and is certainly not sanctioned by the society.<sup>35</sup> To evaluate fairly this special quality of magic it must be seen in its total conceptual framework. That is, the principle which was seen to be the binding agent across the multiple, and theoretically indefinite number of disparate animate beings, was the Whirlwind.<sup>36</sup> This Whirlwind (*Umi*), however, is represented in Oglala mythology as being “unborn”; he was a kind of “playful” abstraction from his four brother winds (*Eya*, *Yata*, *Yanpa*, and *Okaga*), who marked the four directions of space. These four winds, with their “outcast” brother, however, are all conceived to be the sons of “Tate”, and all “...were born at one birth”.<sup>37</sup> According to Walker’s Oglala informant, “The Four Winds is an immaterial God, whose substance is never visible. He is *akan* and therefore no one of mankind can comprehend him. While He is one God, He is four individuals”.<sup>38</sup> The principle of the four then coalesces into a single Wind principle in the anthropomorphized form of “Tate”. But this qualitatively defined, abstract, invisible, and synthesizing Wind principle, cannot be other than the Oglala’s *Wakan-Tanka* (“Great-Spirit”, or “Great-Mystery”) in which, as the Oglala medicine-men have explicitly stated, all *Wakan* “beings” coalesce, or rather, fuse without becoming confused. It is indeed implied in one of the Oglala legends that “Tate” is “the Great Spirit”.<sup>39</sup> Sword, Walker’s Oglala informant, seems to affirm precisely this ultimate principle of Oglala polysynthetic speculative thought<sup>40</sup>: “The word *Wakan-Tanka* means all the *wakan* beings because they are all as if one”.<sup>41</sup>

The outstanding fact which issues from this analysis, of what is but a small segment of Oglala conceptualizations, is that behind expressions which may appear to be “naïve” to the outside observer, there obtains a depth of thought that successfully links and integrates a

---

35. The last practitioner of “black magic” known to the author on Pine Ridge Reservation, disappeared in a mysterious manner after his pipe was refused in a ceremony with older conservative medicine-men.

36. Other types, or qualities, of unifying Agencies also operate, the Oglala believe, in relation to other types of phenomena; forthcoming studies by the present author will deal with these, for analysis of all such conceptual sets are critical to an understanding of the Oglala’s view of his universe.

37. Walker (1917: 84).

38. Ibid.

39. Walker, op. cit., 152.

40. The polysynthetic nature of the Lakota language itself, has long been recognized by linguistic specialists.

41. Walker, op. cit., 152.

multiplicity of phenomenal forms within more general and unifying conceptions. It is indeed a general characteristic of Oglala conceptualizations for the horizontal dimension of the world of appearances to be conceived as being intercepted with the vertical dimension of the sacred, and it is in this point, or moment, of interception that the sense of “mystery” (the *wakan*) is apprehended.

## REFERENCE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blish, H. H. “The Ceremony of the Sacred Bow of the Oglala Dakota”, *American Anthropologist*. New Series, Vol. XXXVI, 1934.
- Boas, Franz and Deloria, Ella. *Dakota Grammar*. Memoirs of The National Academy of Sciences, Vol. XXIII, 1939.
- Brown, Joseph Epes, editor. *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1953.
- Fletcher, Alice. “The Elk Mystery or Festival”, *Reports of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. XVI-XVII, 1883
- . “The Religious Ceremony of the Four Winds or Quarters”, *Reports of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. III, 1884.
- Grinnell, George Bird. *The Cheyenne Indians*, 2 vols. N.Y., Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1962.
- Gudger, E. W., “Spiders as Fishermen and Hunters”, *Natural History*, Vol. XXV, No. 3, 1925.
- La Flesche, Francis, “Who was the Medicine Man?”, *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. XVIII, 1905.
- Mallery, Garrick. “Picture Writing of the North American Indians”, *Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1893.
- Seton, Ernest Thompson. *Life-Histories of Northern Animals*. 2 vols. London, Constable and Co., Ltd., 1910.
- Weygold, Von Friederich. “Das Indianische Lederzelt im Königlichen Museum für Volkerkunde zu Berlin”, *Globus*, Band LXXXIII, Nr. 1, 1903.
- Wissler, Clark. “Symbolism in the Decorative Art of the Sioux”, *Proceedings of the International Congress of Americanists*, Vol. XIII, 1902.
- . “Decorative Art of the Sioux Indians”, *American Museum of Natural History Bulletin*, Vol. XVIII, pt. 3, 1904.
- . “The Whirlwind and the Elk in the Mythology of the Dakota”, *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. XVIII, 1905.
- . “Some Protective Designs of the Dakota”, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. I, Pt. 2, 1907.
- . “Societies and Ceremonial Associations in the Oglala Division of the Teton-Dakota”, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. XI, Pt. I, 1912.