

# Lakota Epistemology as Holistic Being

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## Abstract

In this article, the author describes Lakota epistemology in ways that reveal its natural “holistic” dimensions. Referring to Indigenous ways of knowing, healing and spirituality, she offers examples of how they are each the embodiment of holistic understandings.

**Keywords:** *Lakota Epistemology, Relationality, Lakota Language*

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Several thousand years ago, the only cherished son of a Lakota man and Lakota woman went out to hunt one day and did not return. The family looked for him and could not find him. They called upon a *Wakan Iyeska* (Wah-kunh Ee-yeh-skah, Interpreter of the Sacred) who called upon his spirit helpers to help locate the boy. The family was told in the ceremony where to look for him and they could not find him. They went back to the *Wakan Iyeska* who told them he was there where you were told to look. When they searched again, they saw a bush with red branches and they were told, that is him, that is your son – he gave his life so that the people would have a medicine, *c’an s’a s’a* (chunh shah shah, red willow bark) for sacred tobacco offerings. The red color in the bark is the blood of the relative that gave his life.

This story reveals how reciprocity is critical to the Lakota. To this day, the Lakota people gather the red willow branches during the appropriate time of year and prepare it for use in their *c’anunpa* (sacred pipe). The plant, *c’an s’a s’a* (red willow bark used for a natural tobacco offering) could be seen as an inanimate object but the origin of where the plant came from is a reminder to the people to treat all life as sacred and as relatives, a tenet central to Lakota epistemology. It shows that relationships form the foundation for how to function and thrive in the world; respecting and honoring all forms of sacred life was taught as a way to keep in balance.

A prime example of the sacredness of life was how Lakota children are traditionally viewed as gifts from the Creator and as the lifeblood of the future of the people. Thus, every opportunity to enhance their growth – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually – was taken as a responsibility to support them in reaching their full potential and fulfill their purpose in life. Lakota people refer to the unborn child as “*hoksi nagi*” (spirit child) and not as a fetus, baby, or child. The general Lakota term for boy and girl child is “*Wakanyeya*,” or “as a sacred being. This is because it is believed that the child exists as a spiritual being prior to being born to the earth. The mother was protected by the extended family thereby protecting the *hoksi nagi*. Once the *hoksi nagi* came to the physical realm of the earth, then he or she traveled through seven stages of life from spirit in womb, to infant, to child, to youth, to adult, to elder and then to spirit again.

Each stage of life has teachings, protocols, and ceremonies that correspond to the age range within each stage. For example, the *Hoksicila* stage began with a grandmother welcoming the infant to the world, bestowing a blessing on the infant, giving thanks to the Creator for the gift, and making a prediction for the life of the infant as he or she makes the journey through each stage. The *Wakanyeya* (“as a sacred being”) was treated as sacred, never being hit and always being spoken to gently, which was a reflection of the

belief of their sacredness. Conduct toward the child was governed by the belief that the child's spirit could turn around and return to the spirit world at any time. The epistemology, or ways of knowing, of the Lakota people included great reverence for higher spiritual powers. The belief that those higher spiritual powers could influence the journey of the child on earth or contribute to an untimely return to the spirit world was given great credence.

While Cajete (2005) asserted there is no American Indian translation for epistemology, epistemology would be explained in the Lakota language as "*Lakol Wiyeya Pi*" (a collective knowledge and worldview). The story about how the Lakota people received the gift of the *c'an c'an s'a s'a* (red willow) is one example. It has been passed down from generation to generation and provides a framework for "*o'han*" (a way of being or how to conduct oneself). Lessons can be taken from this seemingly simple story such as honoring kinship. Those that know and honor the teachings from the story relate to the *c'an s'a s'a* as a relative by offering tobacco and a prayer before harvesting the plant.

Nakata *et al.* (2005) make a critical point that traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples includes both past and continuing knowledge. Sadly, we are losing our traditional knowledge. Each generation is being moved away from nature's spiritual energy and pathways. Through honoring this Lakota teaching, individuals learn the importance of "*wayuonihan*," the concept of honoring self and others so that life can continue.

Deloria and Wildcat (2001) observed that the parameters of American Indian knowledge were based on not what is believed to be true or correct but on respect. Kovach (2010, 41) refers to it as "knowledge nested within the social relations of knowledge production." The aspects of interconnectedness and relationality in North American Indian philosophy are foundational cornerstones (Deloria, 1999; Bishop, 1999) discussing the underpinnings of Indigenous knowledge, Cajete stated that,

Indians throughout the Americas incorporate a number of symbolic expressions that reflect the metaphysical, ecological, and cultural constructs of tribal epistemology. These symbolic constructs, when translated, include the following: Tree of Life, Earth Mother, Sun Father, Sacred Twins, Mother of Game or Corn, Old Man, Trickster, Holy Wind or Life's Sake, We Are All Related, Completed Man/Woman, the Great

Mystery, LifeWay, and Sacred Directions. These expressions, which occur in a variety of forms in nearly all-American Indian languages, reflect common understandings and shared foundations for traditional ways of learning. That is, behind each of these mythic metaphors are the philosophical infrastructures and fields of tribal knowledge that lie at the heart of American Indian epistemologies. (Cajete, 2005, 72-73)

The ultimate representation of the Lakota metaphysical, ecological and cultural understanding is our phrase, "*Mitakuye Oyasin*," which means "We Are All Related." It reflects the deep holism and holistic nature of Lakota knowledge for all aspects of life: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, space and place. For example, Lakota people believe they are part of the universe with a responsibility to be a "good relative" to all, not only humans but all entities including the nations of four-legged, winged, stones, plants, trees, stars, spirit beings, ghosts, water, and fire. Traditional Lakota knowledge is exemplified in the day-to-day behavior and conduct, in the ceremonial lifeways and through songs and stories.

### Storytelling and Communication in Lakota Epistemology

Brant Castanello (2004, 100) explained "Traditional teachings are conveyed through example, through stories and songs, in ceremonies and, most importantly, through engagement with the natural world which is governed by laws of life just as human beings are." Vernon (2012), related how stories help "Native people learn who they are, where they come from, and how to act." An example is the story of how a group of Lakota people living in a *Wicoti* (camp) were starving so a young man set out to find food for his people. He was sent with a little food to sustain him on his journey, he came upon a *Ti Ikciye* (common dwelling or Tipi) where an old woman lived by herself. She related that she had nothing to eat so he offered the food he had to her. She told him that because he was generous, he would always have food. As he went on his way, he looked in his pack and seen that he had an abundance of food which sustained him throughout his journey. He then came upon another *Ti Ikciye* and there was a beautiful young woman living there, she invited him to take shelter in her *Ti Ikciye*. They fell in love, but the man knew he had to continue his journey to find food for his people. He told her he had to leave, she said she would go with him and help him, and they became companions for life. During part of their journey, the spirit of the Sun spoke to the man telling him

that if he danced before him (the sun) and shed his blood on the ground then his prayers would be answered.

The characters of the old woman and the sun in the story show the importance of having regard for Elders and of seeking and following spiritual guidance as part of life's journey. The teachings in the story emphasize the values of "*Ihakikta*" (looking out for others), "*Wacante Ognaka*" (generosity), "*tohan ni ya pi*" (being together for life, a value taken from the Eagle relatives), "*okiciya pi*" (helping one another) and "*Icicu pi*" (sacrificing self for others, as in the Sundance ceremony). A contemporary representation of the value of *Ihakikta* is shown by Dennis (2014, 44) in her study on grief and loss among Lakota Elders; she identified "collective responsibility" as a critical dynamic that the Elders shared in response to tragic community events.

Stories handed down through the generations were transmitted orally and seen by mainstream society as folklore, mythology, and without actual substance. Brayboy (2005) discussed how the value of stories and narratives were minimized, "locating theory as something absent from stories and practices is problematic in many Indigenous communities and in the work of anthropologists who seek to represent Indigenous communities" (426). The theory was that storytelling "honours orality as a means of transmitting knowledge and upholds the relational..." (Brayboy, 2005, 42) and was an effective way to convey a message that would promote Lakota ways of being that were grounded in the value of being a good relative to all Wilson, 2008).

### Factors of Language and Communication in Lakota Epistemology

Lakota holistic knowledge is rooted in Indigenous language. It has much deeper meaning than what can be conveyed in English. For example, "*wa cante ognaka*" is translated as "generosity" but the term actually means "to hold others in the heart." It signifies the importance of being generous and sharing with others, which guards against materialism and individualism and promotes a relational worldview where everyone and everything is given consideration. The Lakota language is concept based, that is, a few words can speak volumes. For example, a drawn out "*ohaanh*" signifies "I hear you, I empathize"; a male expressing sadness and regret while listening to your tale of misfortune might say, "*hown*." Knowing that you are being heard and listened to, that someone is fully present for you can be healing.

Lakota ways of knowing included expressions of communication as in euphemisms and metaphors in the Lakota language that are intended to influence the conduct in a diplomatic, indirect way. Cajete (2005, 72) stated that "... most traditional knowledge was contextualized in the day-to-day life experience of the people. For example, "*tuweni hecu sni*" ("no one does that"), was a common term used to let a person know that what they did or are doing is against protocol. The consequences of acting in a manner unbecoming of Lakota value driven conduct was often attributed to *Wakunza*, or "supernatural retribution" (Grobsmith, 1974). For example, when a person stole something, the retribution believed to be influenced by the spiritual powers, was that the person would lose two or three times as much the value of what was stolen.

Lakota ways of knowing in communication guided the people in when, where and how to express themselves to assure being in balance. Young people would not express themselves publicly without seeking permission from Elders or without excusing themselves before Elders. It was thought that the Elders had more of a right to speak publicly based on their wisdom generated by years of lived experience. Part of that wisdom was to be deliberate with words and thoughts. The term "*i-ni wakan*," a Lakota term that means, loosely translated, "what comes out of your mouth is sacred. This meant the person's words had to be carefully chosen as the words have a spirit and can have great impact, positive or negative, on whomever they are directed at. Gossip was strongly discouraged as individuals were told that the spirit of those words would make a circle and come back to them.

### Communicating with the Spirits

Spirit is inseparable from Lakota life ways and communication with the spirit world is a natural and continual practice for those who still remember the old way. It is a way to stay in tune with the environment and all of creation in the universe. When Lakota people hunted a buffalo, for example, they would prepare for the hunt spiritually because they knew the buffalo are spiritual relatives. They would make prayers and offerings to the Pte Oyate (buffalo nation) asking them to give up one of their relatives so that the people would live. Once they hunted the buffalo, they would make a tobacco offering to the spirit of the buffalo, and then drink the blood as they considered every part of the buffalo as medicine. They would then observe the pancreas of the buffalo, in which the thickness

of the organ would indicate whether the winter would be harsh or mild. This knowledge was passed down through the generations as a way of knowing how to prepare for the coming winter.

The seasons and the spiritual calendar guided the Lakota people as a way of knowing what to do and when to do it. The late Matthew Bear Shield, Oglala Lakota Wakan Iyeska (Interpreter of the Sacred) strongly asserted that "When we followed the Lakota ways and spiritual laws of the universe, the people flourished. Because we went away from the Lakota spiritual calendar, our people suffer and are in chaos" (Robertson, Jorgensen & Garrow, 2004, 499). Observing and following the spiritual calendar kept the people in balance and in tune with the universe. For example, when the sun passed through the constellation of the *Wincinala Sakowin* (seven little girls) during the Spring Equinox, the Lakota people knew it was time to fill their sacred pipes and pray to welcome back the Thunder Beings and ask for their compassion as well. This particular constellation and ceremony is associated with a sacred site in the Black Hills called *Hinhan Kaga Paha* (Imitates Owl Mountain).

Keeping in balance with human relatives and all other entities, life forms and spirit forms in the universe was the foundation for the laws, values, customs and beliefs of the Lakota people. There was an inherent belief in providing children with a well-rounded Lakota cultural education so they would have the knowledge, fortitude and wisdom to navigate the *Oinajin Topa* (Four Stages of Life) on earth and live to become a *Winuhcala* (Elder woman) or *Wicahcala* (Elder man) so they can pass on the cultural and spiritual teachings of the Lakota people.

I want to note that writing about Indigenous stories and spiritual teachings is risky. Davis (2004) posits that stories help us understand the world, ourselves and as ways to communicate, but cautions of the risks in writing about Indigenous stories including compromising the integrity of stories by creating opportunities for readers to misinterpret, decontextualize, or offend Indigenous knowledge holders who believe certain stories should not be written about. Lakota epistemology is no different. There are ways of knowing that belong to certain societies among the Lakota, and that only Lakota's who know the language and ceremony can talk about or discuss. There is Lakota knowledge that cannot be written down nor discussed publicly, particularly in the realm of spirituality.

*Lakol Wiyeya Pi* (a collective knowledge and worldview) encompasses a broad and complex network of elements that include ways of knowing related to philosophy, communication, religion, astronomy or star knowledge, relationships, science, arts and spirituality. It also has a fluid nature that precludes categorizing these elements. The evolving nature of Lakota epistemology is evident in the way that Elders saw a need to develop a Lakota cultural model that addressed individuals, particularly children, who were out of balance and disconnected from their Lakota cultural lifeways. This imbalance and disconnection is reflected in the following examples where children, once regarded and treated as "sacred beings" are now suffering unspeakable violations and exposure to violence and trauma.

I close by saying that the Indigenous worldview, as represented by the unique place-based Lakota knowledge, is the foundation for what is being called "holistic education." As such, holistic education cannot work in a colonized context that over-emphasizes the dominant worldview over the Indigenous one. The tragic consequences of the loss of the Lakota way of knowing and the disregard for our Indigenous worldview foretell of what is in store for all life on Mother Earth.

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