

**Indigenous Languages of Participation:
A Case Study in a Lakota Sense of Movement**

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Among the traditional Lakota of the Northern Plains if a person undertook a quest for experience and knowledge of cosmic realities he might wear blue during the Sundance. The Lakota elder, George Sword, told the physician, James Walker, in the early 20th century that: "A blue skirt is an emblem of *Taku Skanskan*, that is, of the heavens, and indicates that the wearer is engaged in a sacred undertaking."ⁱ This sentence suggests multiple languages are operative in the quest for participation in the blue dome of cosmic space named in Lakota as *Taku Skanskan*. However, an etymological rendition of *Taku* is "Everything", and *Skanskan* is "Changing-changing" which suggests that more than simply color and sky references are intended.ⁱⁱ This religious quest, then, can be expressed as a desire to align oneself and one's community harmoniously with primal movement in the deeply changing world. One issue to clarify here is the seemingly abstract character of "the heavens" with this indigenous people's worldview that is so sensuously grounded. Another issue is how a cosmologically oriented quest for *Taku Skanskan* orients Lakota practitioners to the ecological world in which they are embedded. Both of these questions lead us into discussions of Lakota languages of participation. Furthermore, the citation from Walker is in the historical past, but do these Lakota ways continue into the historical present?

This is a case study, then, of the ways in which an indigenous ritual can intentionally coalesce languages, and compress them into an experience of kinship with reality. For our purposes, I want briefly to consider, first, sensing as a bodily expressed language of participation signaled by wearing the color, blue.

Second, I want to focus on the concept, *Taku Skanskan*, as itself a language of participation for the Lakota in which units of sound presence particular groupings of meaning.ⁱⁱⁱ Finally, I propose the sacred undertaking in the Sundance as a setting in which a coalescence of these languages of participation serves as a traditional vehicle for activating understandings of person and community of life as harmonious and relational kinship.

Language of Sensing

Consider this question as an entry into “language of participation” for the traditional Lakota. Would the color, blue, be a language, a word, or a symbol? Seemingly, it could be a Lakota word that functions as a symbol. This interpretation would understand an indigenous symbol, such as the blue skirt, as an experiential activation of symbolic consciousness. In effect, a symbol represents something apart from, or other than, the symbol itself. Thus, Walker recorded the wearing of the blue skirt as “an emblem of *Taku Skanskan*” suggesting a representation of the heavens that the male dancer puts on himself. However, by wearing the color blue a Lakota dancer embodies something more than simply a representation of the sky above him. Rather, by wearing blue the dancer both embodies a multidimensional concept and activates multivalent connections into the movement and change of cosmological and ecological realms. As Joseph Brown reports in ***The Sacred Pipe: Black Elks's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux***:

The use of this blue paint is very important and very sacred, if you understand the meaning, for, as I have often said, the power of a thing or an act is in the understanding of its meaning. Blue is the color of the heavens, and by placing blue upon the tobacco, which represents the earth, we have united heaven and earth, and all has been made one.^{iv}

Here, the person preparing the pipe for ritual smoking has set in movement a triangulation of those attending the ceremony with heaven and earth. Rather than abstract entities these are material, sensed blue paint, tobacco, and embodied

participants. Before a Sundance those entering would prepare themselves by a pipe smoking ceremony to clarify why they would undertake such an arduous ritual.

In the Lakota tradition a person dancing in the Sundance articulates an epistemological desire for relation with cosmological powers through ritual embodiment. A dancing person seeks to know, but who is a "person" and what is "knowledge" for the Lakota? One response to these questions coalesces, I believe, in a language of participation I name, embodied sensing, or simply sensing. A string of such embodied sensings clusters together in a ritual that constitutes a language known by the community. Thus, a dancer is a unique, individual person, but real knowledge of personhood comes in the context of community validation. That is, knowledge comes through traditional practices transmitted in a community, or in visions granted by the powers of the universe. Validation of individual knowledge always occurs in material forms whether that is the person's body-mind, in objects collected into a "medicine bundle," or in the body of a community (*tiyospaye*).

It is this anchoring of symbolic consciousness in the movement and change of material bodies that I see as a key move in the text, *Journey of the Universe*. This is a philosophical turn that brings it into relatedness with diverse linguistic forms of indigenous ways of knowing pointedly expressed in ritual. This turn also helps to frame questions regarding subjectivity in the world using such an indigenous concept as *skan*. That is, subjective persons change and this is a felt and foundational Lakota perspective on reality.

Another way of expressing this position with regard to sensing is to consider body movement. In discussing Plains Sign Language among the Assiniboine peoples, closely related to the Lakota, Brenda Farnell in her work, *Do You See What I Mean*, distinguishes body movement as a language. She writes:

The use of [Plains Sign Language] PST in storytelling and the other contexts examined so far have suggested a definition of languages among Plains peoples that differs substantially from that held by Europeans and Euro-American philosophical and linguistic traditions. The fact that structured bodily action - language using a visual-kinesthetic medium rather than the oral-aural medium of spoken language -

should be included as language in the full sense of the word in turn leads to the proposition that conceptions of relations between mind and body, reason and feeling, mind and matter, might also be fundamentally different.

These are deeply rooted metaphysical and epistemological questions of considerable complexity that I can only begin to shed light on here, but it can be said that in Western thought such dualisms have laid a foundation for an epistemology in which mind and reason, and therefore knowing and knowledge itself, are removed from the body and its movement. In contrast to this, an Assiniboine philosophy of being-in-the-world makes body movement foundational... Assiniboine theories of social and personal action appear to be centered in a form of meaningful social life in which body movement is intrinsic as a way of knowing. ^v

In this perspective embodied sensing activates indigenous knowing differently than intellectual, critical knowing as the latter is characterized in dominant Western Enlightenment thought. In addition, as embodied knowing this form of sensing opens questions about communications from the world that floods into our sense faculties. In this context questions arise: can the world speak to us? Is subjectivity a plausible way of speaking about things that change in the Lakota worldview?

Language of Minding

To consider such a cluster of embodied sensings apart from the spoken concepts that accompany them is incomplete. To return to the Lakota example above, the color blue of the dancer orients him bodily towards *Taku Skanskan*. When the physician, Walker, spoke with the Lakota elders and shamans, he found this concept extremely difficult to translate in part because *Taku Skanskan* was often associated closely with the phrases, *Wakan Tanka* and *Taku Wakan*, Both of these phrases were used by 19th and 20th century Christian missionaries to the Lakota to translate the concept "God." What confused Walker and other early ethnographers was their concern to establish univalent English meanings for Lakota words. Furthermore, Lakota elders often spoke of these concepts as powers that were limited insofar as any human could know or use them.

Consider a Lakota perspective in which the valences, or charges, of such words as *Taku Skanskan*, as powers of the universe, could and do overlap. Thus, the "mysterious presence of power in things," or *Wakan Tanka*, could also be "Changing-changing" or *Taku Skanskan*. Indeed, the changes could be so dramatic that a singular "power" that healed could also, at times and in different settings, kill. Good could transform into misfortune or evil. This is not the customary theological dualism of the West in which God is the creator of all that is good. Moreover, to complexify the overlap, the blue dome of heaven, or *Taku Skanskan* includes, in some mysterious way, all the heavenly bodies - Sun, Moon, comet, Morning Star, and other heavenly bodies. Walker himself, it appears, did not understand a central, seminal insight that his translator, Gorge Sword, had tried to tell him, namely:

He [Sword] insisted that a great change had come over the Lakota language since it had been reduced to writing by white missionaries. Sword felt that as the language was formerly spoken - and as it was still spoken in ceremonies and formal speeches - each syllable was a distinct unit of meaning. Sequences of syllables that the missionaries accepted as equivalents for English words were really phrases, according to Sword. ^{vi}

Thus, a phrase such as *Taku Skanskan* rather than being monovalent is itself a generative minding of conceptual presences. During rituals such as the Sundance, this minding embraces clusters of embodied sensings performed by both an individual dancer and by all the dancers in the Sundance lodge. For the Lakota dancer wearing blue, there is a conjunction of personal and social languages focused on a deeper experience of cosmological realities. That is, the concept, *Taku Skanskan*, is not separate from the sensual experience of blue, the felt relationship with wind, or the power of the Sun. ^{vii} All of these embodied sensings overlap with minding of the mysterious to disorient the sacred and, then, by means of ritual reconceptualize the sacred (*wakan*) in the undertaking of the Sundance.

This overlapping of linguistic experiences, namely minding and embodied sensing, are ways of experiencing the "powers of the cosmos" to draw on the insights of *The Journey of the Universe*. Moreover, for the Lakota these

convergences of language are also ways of healing. One ethnographer of Lakota life described it this way:

The sacred knowledge that energy is finite and is in constant flux between sacred and evil influences flows through all of Oglala ritual. It is only through sacred ritual that harmony can be achieved and the universe restored to its proper balance. This harmonious balance is dramatized in all of the rituals. The famine of winter is offset by the abundance of summer. In ritual language those who are ill "walk through winter in darkness" (*waniyetu opta aiyakpa omanipi*). The ignorance of darkness is contrasted with the knowledge of light which comes forth every morning in the form of *Anpo wicahpi* 'Morning Star'.^{viii}

William Powers' insights into the forms of this Lakota sacred language and its use in ritual healing are remarkable, but I wonder if he also was fixated on Western ideals of harmony as balance. Perhaps, if he had considered Lakota cosmology as also a religious ecology he would have nuanced the "balance" he saw with *Skanskan*, or deep-change. Here again we see that the *Journey of the Universe* expresses a parallel thought as it explores self-organizing dimensions of changing, evolutionary reality.

The Language of Practice

The Lakota Sundance, *Wi wanyang waccipi*, focuses on *Wi* "the sun," *wanyang* "to gaze," and *wacipi* "they dance." This is one of the seven central community-oriented ceremonials of the Lakota. The Sundance is a four-day ritual held in spring or summer during which dancers undertake an ordeal of fasting and self-sacrifice that opens them to *skan*, change. This transformation, often associated with healing, takes place in a circular lodge, *tipi wakan*, that is for the Lakota a sensing body that makes present the powers of the cosmos. For a dancer wearing blue and questing for *Taku Skanskan* the dance is not simply individual, but a communal vision quest. Thus, the language of the dancers' quest is a communal expression that finds verbal articulation in the phrase, *mitakuye oyasin* "we are all related" or "all my relations."

What we can move toward as a conclusion is the remarkable insight of the Lakota tradition in generating complex understandings of reality using metaphors of kinship, overlapping realities, and interrelated persons. Most important, however, is a frank recognition of Lakota social genius in formulating and transmitting rituals that bring individuals into personal realizations, and community orientations in the context of cosmic mysteries. Through multiple languages of participation, Lakota traditional practice triangulates bodies-in-movement, namely, the universe, the human, and the natural world. Again, I cite Brenda Farnell who discusses the Assiniboine term *ska* that is closely related to the Lakota *skan*. She observes:

If the concepts Walker worked so hard to elaborate from the Lakota myth are correct, then *ska* is a theoretical construct that places this force-for-movement at the center of an epistemology as well as an ontology. That is, analogous to this causal power for motion in the natural and superhuman order of things may be a conception of movement of the body as a causal power for a way of knowing in the world.

It is striking that in a language which does not articulate terms for abstract concepts such as time and space the term *ska* gives linguistic form to this concept of force-for-movement. *Ska* appears not only as a theoretical concept that like the concept of gravity cannot in itself be seen, but, according to the myth, is a causal power above all others.

The seven rituals continue to function for the Lakota though much diminished from earlier periods following decades of devastating encounters with dominant American society.^{ix} Through languages of participation the Lakota still empower individuals and communities with ways of relating self, society, and cosmos. Embodied knowledge of such ideas as *skan* serve to focus questions about the nature of the world. While this concept was not an evolutionary perspective, it honors movement in the cosmos as indicative of subjectivity, or personhood. There are complex and seminal connections to story, place, and biodiversity that I have not explored in these remarks. But what has been presented will, I hope, suggest that indigenous peoples in many and diverse ways have contributions to make as we reimage ourselves in our home experience of the cosmos we now know to be in movement through us, around us, and beyond us.

ⁱ James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* Edited by Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1980: 183.

ⁱⁱ Confirmation of an interpretation of *skan* as the primacy of movement can be found in an article by Elaine Jahner (1980) who states, "The starting point for studying the [Lakota] world-view has to be the idea that movement itself is the primal image for life." Furthermore, variations of this term, e.g. *ska* among the Assiniboine, and the concept itself are not exclusive to the Lakota but are found among many Siouan-speaking groups, for example, among the Omaha and Osage of the central plains.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is similar, I believe, to what Kathleen Dean Moore, discusses as "metaphors of meaning." Discussions of *Taku Skanskan* can be found, for example, in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, and Walker, *Lakota Myth* Edited by Elaine A. Jahner, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1983; as well as William K. Powers, *Oglala Religion* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977; Powers, *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986; and Raymond Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual of the Sweat Lodge: History and Contemporary Practice* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998. Bucko actually gives the Lakota spelling as *Tákuskaska*.

^{iv} Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elks's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953: 123.

^v Brenda Farnell, *Do You See What I Mean? Plains Indian Sign Talk and the Embodiment of Action* Austin: University of Texas, 1995: 243.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 21. The editors correctly identify some of Walkers' contributions and limitations in their chapter "James R. Walker: His Life and Work."

^{vii} Bucko cites Gideon Pond's monograph from 1908 saying: "Stones were considered the symbol for and sometimes the dwelling place of *Takuskaska*, "that which moves." See Gideon Pond, *The Dakotas or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834* Reprint St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986: 87.

^{viii} William K. Powers, *Oglala Religion*: 181.

^{ix} See, for example, Bruce Lincoln, "A Lakota Sun Dance and the Problematics of a SocioCosmic Reunion," in *History of Religions* Vol 34, No. 1, August 1994: