

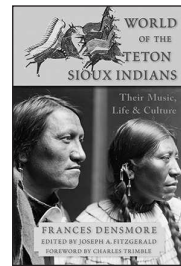
# World of the Teton Sioux Indians: Their Music, Life, and Culture

*By Frances Densmore, Edited by Joseph A. Fitzgerald*

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**A**gainst a backdrop of the cultural extinction of the American Indians, and the apparently imminent end of the “Indian race” that marked the early part of the 20th century when one saw the banning of the First Peoples’ tribal languages and their religious practices through programs of forced assimilation, there was a lesser-known remarkable cultural resurgence taking place. In August of 1913, groundbreaking anthropologist Frances Densmore met with two Teton (or Lakota) Sioux warriors, Old Buffalo and Swift Dog in McLaughlin, South Dakota to record Native American lifeways before the reservation era began. Old Buffalo was recorded to have spoken the following words about this process:

We come to you as from the dead. The things about which you ask us have been dead to us for many years. In bringing them to our minds we are calling them from the dead, and when we have told you about them they will go back to the dead, to remain forever. (p. 235)

It is in this spirit that Frances Densmore’s *World of the Teton Sioux Indians* came alive, giving voice to numerous firsthand accounts of the

traditional Teton Sioux world—such as religion, dreams and visions, healing, military societies, buffalo hunting and social dances.

This abridged edition was originally published in 1918 under the title *Teton Sioux Music*, as Bulletin 61 of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, and was held to be a landmark in the study of ethnomusicology. The first edition contained a great deal of technical material that made accessing the valuable cultural dimensions of this work more cumbersome and was less useful to the non-musical specialist. In this version this material has been extracted to allow the other facets of the traditional Teton Sioux culture to come to the foreground. An accolade for Densmore's book by Professor Raymond J. DeMallie affixed to the back cover speaks to its importance: "One of the most significant ethnographic works ever published on the Sioux." Another weighty endorsement for this book is by Professor William K. Powers, who wrote: "One of the few monographs universally regarded as a true classic of Lakota culture." Also included in this abridged edition are over 130 color and black-and-white illustrations which further illuminate the world of the Teton Sioux.

Densmore reminds readers about the profound spiritual message contained within traditional American Indian songs that cannot be taken at face value without the loss of deeper meaning: "The words of certain songs are in a 'sacred (esoteric) language'" (p. xxii). One might add that this "sacred language" is the timeless wisdom transmitted through Tradition, which is not man-made. "[S]acred language'...is unintelligible to those who are not initiated into its mysteries." (p. 76)

### Ceremonies

In order to understand the Native American religion one needs to bear in mind that the Great Spirit or Great Mystery (*Wakan-Tanka*) was both omnipresent in the world of creation and also simultaneously beyond it. It was through Pte San Win—the "White Buffalo Calf Woman"—that the Teton Sioux received the seven sacred rites, such as the sacred pipe and the sacred ritual of the Sun Dance. White Buffalo Calf Woman is reported to have given the following message:

I represent the Buffalo tribe, who have sent you this pipe. You are to receive this pipe in the name of all the common people [Indians]. Take it, and use it according to my directions. The bowl of the pipe is red stone—a stone not

very common and found only at a certain place. This pipe shall be used as a peacemaker. The time will come when you shall cease hostilities against other nations. Whenever peace is agreed upon between two tribes or parties this pipe shall be a binding instrument. By this pipe the medicine-men shall be called to administer help to the sick.

In giving you this pipe you are expected to use it for nothing but good purpose. The tribe as a whole shall depend upon it for their necessary needs. You realize that all your necessities of life come from the earth below, the sky above, and the four winds.... Take this pipe, and offer it to *Wakan 'tanka* daily. (pp. 6-7)

The White Buffalo Calf Woman is said to have sung the following song when she entered the camp to reveal the seven sacred rites—a song used in the Spirit-keeping ceremony:

<i>niya' tanin 'yan</i>	... with visible breath
<i>mawa 'ni ye</i>	... I am walking
<i>oya 'te le</i>	... this nation (the Buffalo nation)
<i>ima 'wani</i>	... I walk toward
<i>na</i>	... and
<i>bo 'taninyan</i>	... my voice is heard
<i>mawa 'ni ye</i>	... I am walking
<i>niya' tanin 'yan</i>	... with visible breath
<i>mawa 'ni ye</i>	... I am walking
<i>walu 'ta le</i>	... this scarlet relic
<i>ima 'wani ye</i>	... (for it) I am walking (p. 8)

There are many misunderstandings about the ancient Sun Dance ceremony, as Densmore herself emphasizes, “It is probable that no Indian ceremony has been misinterpreted so widely and so persistently as the Sun dance.” (p. 27) Red Bird regarded the Sun Dance to be the spiritual center of the Native American religion:

There is a great deal in what a man *believes*, and if a man's religion is changed for the better or for the worse he will know it. The Sun dance was our first and our only religion. We believed that there is a mysterious power greater than all others, which is represented by nature, one form of representation being the sun. Thus we made sacrifices to the sun, and our petitions were granted. The Indians lived longer in the old days than now. I would not say this change is due to throwing away the old religion; there may be other reasons, but in the old times the Sun dance was held annually and was looked forward to with eagerness. I believe we had true faith at that time. But there came a year when “the sun died.” There was a period of darkness, and from that day a new religion

came to the Indians. It is the white man's religion. We are timed about it, as we are about the other ways of the white man. In the old days our *faith* was strong and our lives were cared for; now our faith is weaker, and we die. (p. 27)

So sacred was the Sun Dance to the American Indians that it was seldom discussed. Chased-by-Bears explained the necessity to prepare oneself to discuss such sacred matters: "The Sun dance is so sacred to us that we do not talk of it often. Before talking of holy things we prepare ourselves by offerings. If only two are to talk together, one will fill his pipe and hand it to the other, who will light it and offer it to the sky and the earth. Then they will smoke together, and after smoking they will be ready to talk of holy things." (p. 37)

Charging Thunder expressed the significance of the four winds and how the sacred pipe is used to make offerings: "When we hold the pipe toward the sky, we are offering it to *Wakan 'tanka*. We offer it to the earth because that is our home and we are thankful to be here; we offer it to the east, south, west, and north because those are the homes of the four winds; a storm may come from any direction, therefore we wish to make peace with the winds that bring storms." (p. 59)

<i>tunka 'sila</i>	... grandfather
<i>bo uwa 'yin kte</i>	... a voice I am going to send
<i>nama 'bon ye</i>	... hear me
<i>maka' sito 'mniyan</i>	... all over the universe
<i>bo uwa 'yin kte</i>	... a voice I am going to send
<i>nama 'bon ye</i>	... hear me
<i>tunka 'sila</i>	... grandfather
<i>wani' ktelo'</i>	... I will live
<i>epelo'</i>	... I have said it (pp. 60-61)

### Dreams and Their Obligations

Dreams and visions are a vital element of traditional Native American way of life. The dream or vision that is disclosed to the individual originates in a supernatural source, known as the Great Spirit or Great Mystery (*Wakan-Tanka*). The dream or vision was held to correspond to the character of the individual experiencing it. It was also an obligation that, once bestowed, the individual had to live in accordance with its message as the dream or vision provided important meaning and guidance that could be used throughout the individual's life. "[I]t was

considered obligatory that the man avail himself of the supernatural aid vouchsafed to him in the dream, and arrange his life in accordance with it.” (p. 75) Additionally, the obligation of the dream or vision was often announced to the tribe as a whole.

Lone Man, a *heyoka* or a man honored in a dream by the thunderbirds and who conducts himself as a jester or “sacred clown”, was given this song:

<i>maka 'ta</i>	... the earth
<i>e 'tonwan yo</i>	... behold
<i>lena'</i>	... all these
<i>nita 'wa</i>	... yours
<i>ktelo'</i>	... will be
<i>maka 'ta</i>	... the earth
<i>e 'tonwan yo</i>	... behold
<i>lena'</i>	... all these
<i>nita 'wa yelo'</i>	... (are) yours (p. 78)

The sacred unity underlying the web of life was also an experiential message transmitted in the form of dreams and visions, as Brave Buffalo explains, “[A]ll men have a liking for some special animal, tree, plant, or spot of earth. If men would pay more attention to these preferences and seek what is best to do in order to make themselves worthy of that toward which they are so attracted, they might have dreams which would purify their lives....The animals want to communicate with man, but *Wakan 'tanka* does not intend they shall do so directly” (p. 86).

The sick too were given treatment through dreams or visions. Through the dream or vision a healer would receive a prescription of the correct remedy for the illness. The complexity of both physical and psychological diseases nowadays makes their treatment very challenging, as Shooter explains:

In the old days the Indians had few diseases, and so there was not a demand for a large variety of medicines. A medicine-man usually treated one special disease and treated it successfully. He did this in accordance with his dream. A medicine-man would not try to dream of *all* herbs and treat *all* diseases, for then he could not expect to succeed in all nor to fulfill properly the dream of any one herb or animal. He would depend on too many and fail in all. That is one reason why our medicine-men lost their power when so many diseases came among us with the advent of the white man. (p. 131)

### Societies

Among the Teton Sioux there are two types of society, the dream society and military society. Dream societies comprised those who through the agency of dreams or visions had seen the same animal. Their common dream or vision brought them together. Miss Fletcher explains:

Among the Siouan family of Indians there are societies, religious in character, which are distinguished by the name of some animal.... Membership in these societies is not confined to any particular gens, or grouping of gens, but depends upon supernatural indications over which the individual has no control. The animal which appears to a man in a vision during his religious fasting determines to which society he must belong. (p. 159)

Military societies existed among all of the Plains Indians and also derived their origin from common dreams or visions.

### War and Hunting

The loss of a family member or a loved one in battle was not taken lightly by the Teton Sioux:

The grief of those whose relatives were killed on the warpath was intense. Many of the women cut gashes in the flesh of the entire body and limbs, and cropped the hair close to their heads. Many of the men thrust skewers through the flesh on the outside of their legs. It was the custom for them to go around the village circle displaying these signs of mourning, and as they went they sang a song in which they inserted the name of their dead relative, or they might compose an entirely new song in his honor. (p. 201)

Red Fox makes an important point regarding war and the spiritual path: "If anyone wants to be successful in war let him come and join the Sun dance." (p. 212) Elsewhere he states, "*Wakan 'tanka* has but one path. No matter how or where you die you must go by that path." (p. 213) Jaw (*Cebu 'pa*) cites a prayer he offered before going to battle: "*Wakan 'tanka*, I will now smoke this pipe in your honor. I ask that no bullet may harm me when I am in battle." (p. 225)

In contrast to the mass consumption and waste of the contemporary society, the American Indians eschewed wasteful practices. Whatever was hunted was used in its entirety, reverencing that the animal was a gift from the Great Spirit, and that the whole of life was sacred, even in the act of hunting or the necessary taking of life: "The buffalo may be said to have been the essential element in the life of the Plains Indians, as

it supplied them with material for their tents, clothing, and moccasins; with food and containers for food, and household articles; with tools for their handicraft, and even with fuel for their fires. Every part of the animal was utilized.” (p. 241)

### Social Life

A significant portion of Teton Sioux social life revolved around dances of various kinds, which symbolized the close connection between animals and humans.

Concerning Indian dances it was said that in dancing the Indians imitate the actions of animals. In the grass dance the men imitate the motions of the eagle and graceful birds. In the buffalo dance they imitate the buffalo. The old-time dancing dress of the Indians imitated the animals, but there was always a charm or a headdress which indicated the personality of the wearer. The Indians imitate the cries of birds or animals when they dance. Some headdresses imitate the comb of a bird, and a man wearing such a headdress would imitate the actions of that bird. The actions of a dancer always correspond to his costume. (p. 264)

As interest in Native American traditions continues to grow, it is noteworthy that this classic work of the Teton (or Lakota) Sioux has been released in its abridged version to allow readers to focus on its cultural significance. The publishers have generously committed all royalties for this book to be donated to The Language Conservancy to preserve native languages. Frances Densmore’s life-long project to preserve and transcribe traditional American Indian music was not only a breakthrough in ethnomusicology, but shows how music organized all facets of the Teton Sioux lifeways and the interrelatedness of each cultural action to every other through the centrality of the Sacred. To understand the culture is to appreciate its relationship to the Great Spirit or Great Mystery (*Wakan-Tanka*), from which everything derives. The following song, used in the Sun Dance, captures our human reliance on the Spirit for all things:

<i>Wakan 'tanka</i>	... <i>Wakan 'tanka</i>
<i>ca wa 'kiya can 'na</i>	... when I pray to him
<i>nama 'bon e</i>	... hears me
<i>ta 'ku waste'</i>	... whatever is good
<i>maku' welo'</i>	... he grants me (pp. 68-69)