

# Lakota symbolism of the circle essay



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The word circle has many meanings.

According to dictionary. com, it has approximately twenty definitions. Two meanings are: a closed plane curve consisting of all points at a given distance from a point within it called the center and a series ending where it began, especially when perpetually repeated. These previous two definitions are coherent in Lakota religion. One of the most profound symbols in the Lakota culture is the circle. Being keen observers, the people realized the circle appears on many things no matter where you look in the world and beyond.

The sun is round. The moon is round. The earth is round. The seasons follow each other in a perpetual circle. These examples are abundant throughout the seven rites, which Joseph Brown describes, according to Black Elk.

Black Elk is a wicasa wakan, closely translated as a "holy man" of the Lakota Sioux Indians. In this paper, I briefly as possible, will describe some of the rites and show how the circle is important by its representation. First, I must explain the Lakota (sioux) concept of "wakan". In the world of the Lakota, the word wakan means many things. Joseph Brown translates this word as "holy" or "sacred" (3, fn. 1).

In the beginning, he explains how the pipe came about, of course, as according to Black Elk. The knowledge of the pipe is vital in understanding the nature and spirituality of the Lakota. There is more to the meaning of the pipe, but for now I must limit this to its interpretation of being sacred. It is the shape of the bowl of the pipe, which is of course round, hence "bowl", but consequently is made of a round red stone (from the earth), which

means more than the construction of the pipe itself. In addition, the round stone shown to the Lakota people had seven circles upon it, each representing the seven rites, which use the pipe (7).

When the women gave this pipe to her people she also walked clockwise (9). The first rite is the Keeping and Releasing of the soul. This rite is to purify the souls of the dead - a ritual to become one with the Spirit, so that it's able to return to Wakan-Tanka (11). This would be much like trying to put down a few paragraphs accurately summing up "God". The Lakota believed in nature, all that surrounds it and becoming one with the Spirit.

In order to accomplish this they would release the soul - "back to the ground" - Black Elk refers to this as returning to Wakan Tanka. The second part of the rite is where the circle comes into play. "A round circle is scraped on the ground to represent a buffalo wallow, and ..

. another round place is then made from the earth... " (23).

They do this in order to achieve their goal in seeking wakan. Through the rite of releasing the souls, they also learn to be generous, to help those in need, and to follow in every way the teachings of Wanka-Taken (25). The symbol of the circle also suggests the concept of family. "You are as the root of the wakan tree which is at the center of our nation's "hoop"" (27).

The word hoop is in quotes, in which I will explain this term shortly. The traditional Lakota family, called tiyospaye, includes the extended family - aunts, uncles, grandfathers, etc. , and friends that were "made family". So, one is a member of an immediate family, a broader circle of family, and

finally, the entire nation. Beyond that, is the circle of the universe, which includes plants, animals, rocks, stars and all things they consider family. This circle is cohesive, a harmonious organism that I can only sum up as "life".

The phrase "all my relatives" is common and heard often, and explains simply, but profoundly, the concept of interrelated being. In addition, life itself is a circle, from birth to childhood to adulthood to old age to death, only to have another born to take the place of the one gone. Black Elk sums this up very well in saying, "The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is everything where power moves" (Neihardt). It is for this seemingly endless circle of life, that the Lakota sometimes call their existence the "hoop". The second rite, Rite of Purification, used a dwelling called the purification lodge or inipi.

It too was sacred and all that is involved in the building of it. For example, the rocks (circular) are representative of Grandmother Earth and the fire inside it to create smoke, which ascends to the heavens. All of this is sacred. Realistically, they would use the fire to heat the rocks, but it has greater meaning.

"The round fireplace at the center of the sweat lodge is the center of the universe... power which is fire" (32).

If that is not almighty and significant, I do not know what is. While constructing the sweat lodges they make an altar and pray. The rawhide is made into a cord to tie the sticks of the lodge together at the center pole (center of universe), which is in a circle (33). When the Lakota men and sometimes the women, would "lament", or cry for a vision, which is the third

rite, they would use the same sweat lodge. When it is time for a "vision quest", the seeker brings a pipe to the holy man (in this case, Black Elk) to ask for help and counsel.

If the holy man thinks that is a good idea, a day is set to do so. On that day, the holy man and assistants go into the lodge with the lamenter. The lamenter then sits at the north, holyman at the south, and then they rotate in a "sun-wise" or clockwise motion (40). Not only does this movement create a circle, but also has a greater purpose: "Is not the South the source of life, and does not the flowering stick truly come from there? And does not man advance from there toward the setting sun of his life? Then does he not approach the colder North where the white hairs are? And does he not then arrive, if he lives, at the source of light and understanding, which is the East? Then does he not return to where he began, to his second childhood, there to give back his life to all life, and his flesh to the earth whence it came?" (5)

When seeking a vision, the holy man moves from east to south, he waves the pipe in the air in a circle, smokes some and then touches the mouth of the "lamenter", and repeats this four times (61). Each direction has a representative meaning, and often the four directions depict a cross that resembles a "plus sign" within a circle, and is also associated with a color.

Another rite that uses the symbol of the circle is the sun dance, but I shall give a little background first.

Years ago, the living space within the tipi was round, made from a circle of poles. The tepees were set also in a larger circle, and when there were many people and many tepees, the homes were set in a circle. With the circle, it stands for the togetherness of people who sit with one another around a fire,

relatives and friends united in peace, while the pipe passes from hand to hand. All the families in the village were in turn, circles within a larger circle, part of the larger hoop of the nation.

The nation was only a part of the universe, in itself circular - circle within circles, with no beginning and no end. The use of the drum is in this rite because of the shape of the drum. Being round, it symbolizes the whole universe and the sound (pulse) of the drum represents the throbbing at the center of the universe (69). The sun is also represented here as the "sun wise" direction, hence sun dance. In the sun dance they paint a black circle on their faces in order to remember Wakan Tanka, just like the circle has no end (92).

The Lakota religion also uses objects in their rites that they prepare before going into the different lodges. When scouting for a place to erect the lodge, they chose the spot, return to camp, and immediately circle around the place where it is to be built, in a clockwise manner (73). In this example, Kablaya (the first "sun-dancer"), explains the meaning of the object use. "You should prepare a necklace of otter skin, and from it there should hang a circle with a cross in the center" (71).

Kablaya also mentions that in doing so, the cross and circle represent the four Powers of the universe and four ages. Another object includes round rawhide circles that represent the sun and earth (also round), and the heavens (sky), in which the men wear on their chest. At the center of the first rawhide circle should be a blue round circle, which represents Wakan-Tanka, and the earth represented by the red circle. Lastly, one blue circle is

for the heavens (72). I would also like to mention her that, in the sun dance there is an altar.

In the center of the lodge is the pole where a pinch of dirt (earth) is lifted up and some is placed evenly around the pole in a circle, which represents all that is sacred and in the universe (89). The fifth rite, making of the relatives is when another tribe - the Ree, had taken tobacco from the Lakota and then the Lakota had taken the Ree's corn. Thereby had then created peace with them and traded amongst each other and became "relatives". During this exchange of happiness (lack of a better word), the Ree warrior (male) painted the face of the Sioux men and boys' faces red, each with a blue circle upon it (111). Again the symbolism of the circle is prevalent here because it was from another tribe's ritual, which showed the Lakota people that they were all "doing great deeds" and following the right path (the red road). The throwing of the ball is the final rite in which it uses the symbolism of the circle.

A Lakota, Waskn mani (Moves Walking), receives this rite in a vision. Another Lakota, High Hollow Horn saw in a dream, Moves Walking's vision: "Thus, according to our custom High Hollow Horn made a sacred tipi on one side of the camping circle...

" (128). In a vision from Rattling Hail Woman - told to Moves Walking, she sees a girl playing with a ball, which is round, standing at the center of her people. The significance of this is that each time she tossed the ball into the air (in different directions) it came back to her, in the "center" (135). The

four directions and the circle are intertwined, and in tossing the ball into the four directions, it created a circle (imaginary).

In conclusion, to the Lakota it is beautiful and fitting, symbol and reality at the same time, expressing the harmony of nature and life. Their circle is timeless, flowing: it is new life emerging from death - life winning out over death. Aspects of everyday life embrace the circle. As you have seen here, I have demonstrated the importance and symbolism of the circle in the Lakota Religion.