

TETON DAKOTA TIME CONCEPTS: METHODOLOGICAL
FOUNDATIONS FOR THE WRITING OF ETHNOHISTORY

Raymond J. DeMallie
Indiana University

The writing of American Indian history from Indian perspectives looms as a real challenge to those Native Americans searching for a deeper understanding of their past. Just as each generation of historians finds it necessary to rewrite the past in its own terms, projecting the concerns of the present into the past, so each ethnic group finds it important to express its present-day concerns by reexamining its past. True Indian history, written by and for Indians, is an intriguing and promising possibility both for the new light it sheds on the past and for the expression of Indian self-images in the present. What, if anything, do we have to offer Native Americans in search of a past?

Scholars from the dominant culture have usually denied the possibility that Indians can say anything about their past. Condemned as "folk," or "primitives," they have been denied a sense of history. Most Indian histories have been written without consulting living Indians and without serious consideration of Indian traditions.¹ A few Indians have retaliated, writing their own histories without using our libraries and archives and without recourse to our methods of scholarship. We have been forcibly reminded that the writing of history is as much a political act as a scholarly one.

Anthropologists have developed a distinct tradition of historical studies that to a greater or lesser extent uses Indian oral tradition as evidence. The term "ethnohistory" was coined to label the writing of histories of ethnic groups. The journal, Ethnohistory, was founded at Indiana University in 1954 for the express purpose of publishing historical studies of American Indian groups--by-products of the research being done for the Indian land claims cases. Later the term "folk history" was suggested for those studies in which history is written from the point of view of a native people.² The problem with this label is its evocation of "folklore" and hence the idea that folk history is fiction rather than fact. I prefer to use the more neutral term "ethnohistory."

The primary goal of ethnohistory is to write Indian history in a way that incorporates Indian cultural understandings. Basic to this is a comprehension of the natives' own types of history and of the fundamental premises underlying them. Since most native histories are oral documents, the first task is to understand the native classification of the types of oral literature, and to determine the native criteria for historical traditions. Where painted, written, or other graphic forms of history exist, a similar classification must be established, and the relationship between oral and graphic forms must be determined. Taken in the context of the people's culture as a whole, these native histories become important documents. Ethnohistory attempts to reconstruct a meaningful picture of the past that utilizes to the fullest extent all the available sources, both Indian and white.

In order to illustrate the type of understanding I feel to be a necessary prerequisite to the writing of Indian history, I will discuss my work on the Teton Dakota. First I will present in summary fashion the various forms of oral literature traditionally found among the Teton Dakota, focusing on historical traditions. This is followed by discussion of the forms of history as recorded by the Dakota themselves, both before and after the introduction of writing. The Dakota provide a typical example of Plains Indian history, and may serve as a test case to be compared with other areas of native North America.

Oral Traditions

The historical traditions of the Plains Indians were primarily a form of oral literature, handed down from generation to generation as memorized myths and stories. These tribal traditions were certainly not transmitted for generations without significant changes; they are therefore not to be understood as accurate records of past events. In the oral form, change was inevitable. Each narrator emphasized and elaborated those aspects of greatest interest to himself. From time to time additions were made--elaborations of stories by imaginative storytellers using the stock of cultural symbols to clarify the meaning of the tale. The skill of any individual storyteller, however, was not seen as innovation. The good storyteller was he who manipulated the traditional form well, who had a good sense for interesting detail and dramatic structure, and who elaborated the plot to the extreme rather than merely sketching the outline.³ Over time, additions, borrowings, and blendings of parts of various stories affected the nature of the body of tradition. For important stories, a narrator was likely to know more than a single version. Clark Wissler, while recording the mythology of the Blackfeet, came to the conclusion that the differing versions of myths reflect the contributions of various storytellers, and that these different details might be considered as the narrator's "ownership marks."⁴ Wissler wrote:

Once when discussing this matter with a Blood Indian, the venerable old man pulled up a common ragweed, saying, "The parts of this weed all branch off from the stem. They go different ways, but all come from the same root. So it is with the different versions of a myth."⁵

It is, therefore, pointless to search for "correct," or "pure" versions of traditional stories. It is unlikely that the Plains Indians themselves considered most stories to have any single fixed form.

It is also an error to look at all forms of oral literature as reflective of the culture in which they exist. Many very central themes that form the core of mythological collections are found repeated throughout the Americas and, in fact, are distributed in the Old World as well. These "mythemes" may be considered very basic expressions of human concerns, part of the oldest traditions that lay far back in man's history, so that they may be considered to be a part of the mind, rather than of individual cultures.⁶ The key to understanding the traditions of any single culture, therefore, is to obtain a broad

comparative knowledge of the traditions of other groups living in the same geographical area, and of other groups speaking related languages.

One of the more stable types of traditions may be those that are individually or collectively owned by secret societies, or that attach to specific medicine bundles and the ceremonies surrounding them. These phenomena are based on a belief in continuity which, for example, was essential to the life style of the sedentary tribes of the Missouri River valley. Continuity was of less importance to the nomadic Plains tribes, except in the matter of sacred bundles passed down through the generations and, to a lesser extent, age-graded men's societies. Members of secret societies and owners of bundles were liable to possess "sacred" versions of traditions, memorized in infinite detail, and transmitted from one generation to the next only after the payment of considerable sums of goods and the performance of prescribed deeds. These "sacred" stories were generally known to the people at large only in vulgarized and general form, where they may lose their specifically "sacred" character. Thus, origin legends or migration tales that might be deeply religious in their esoteric forms, might well blend into trickster tales and fables in their popular forms.⁷

We may look to the Teton Dakota (Lakota) for a native classification of oral literature:

wicowoyake, 'stories'
ohunkakan, 'myths'
ozuye wicowoyake, 'war stories'
šungmakicinonpi wicowoyake, 'horse stealing stories'
wicowoyake šiksika, 'nasty obscene stories'
wanaği wicowoyake, 'ghost stories'
woiga wooblake, 'jokes, funny stories'⁸

In the Dakota language, sacred stories, origin tales, migration stories, the trickster stories, and many other myths, are classified together under a single term, ohunkakan, whose root, hunika, refers to "ancestors."⁹ Ella Deloria felt that logically, although not linguistically, the Dakota distinguished between true ohunkakan, those dealing with the workings of the gods--events no longer possible or plausible in the world as the Dakota knew it--and "novelistic" ohunkakan, which do not concern the gods, and which, though they contain miraculous elements, are not considered out of the realm of possibility.¹⁰ Walker suggests that the ohunkakan formed a coherent body of sacred lore known only to the shamans, while the ohunkakan known to the people were fragmentary and contradictory, and therefore not really understood.¹¹ Deloria's informants in the 1930s denied the possibility that the shamans withheld information from the people, yet this would seem consistent with the more formal secret societies and acknowledged esoteric tales of other Plains tribes.¹²

Today the term ohunkakan may be used to refer to any story about "the old days." Sometimes the form ehanni ('long ago') ohunkakan is used.¹³

Origin tales seem to have been of little importance to the Dakota. Some traditions relate the origin of the Dakota from a hill,¹⁴ from a girl who survived a great flood by taking refuge on a hill,¹⁵ or from under the earth.¹⁶ Nonetheless, these tales seem to have been of little significance to the Teton as a whole, and they are very infrequently represented in the printed literature as compared to trickster myths and other fables. Black Elk, the Oglala shaman, told John G. Neihardt that the origin of the Sioux was like a man who had fainted; when he wakes up, he doesn't remember what happened before.¹⁷ So it was when the first man came to be, he did not remember anything from before.

Both origin and migration stories seem to have been manipulated for political ends. The Teton claimed to have lived long ago by the sacred lake, Mdewaken (usually identified with Mille Lacs), and this they considered to be the center of the world.¹⁸ At the same time, it validated their claim to the lands in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Teton traditions also recorded that they, with the Yankton groups and the Santee, originally came from the south, then migrated westward from Minnesota to South Dakota and across the Missouri River. However, when the Teton wished to validate their ownership of the great plains, they claimed to have originated west of the Missouri.¹⁹ More recently, the Black Hills region is claimed as the center of the world.²⁰

The obvious conclusion from these many variations is that the Dakota did not place much emphasis on their origins as an intellectual problem. Today some Dakota accept what they consider to be the scientific findings concerning their origins, and assume that the Dakota originated on the east coast of Virginia or Carolina because their linguistic relatives, the Tutelo, lived there at the time of first European contact.²¹ A contemporary Dakota story about the use of the dog in traditional culture begins with an account of the Dakota migration across the Bering Strait.²²

In terms of ancient migrations and ultimate origins, the oral traditions of the Plains Indians provide little data for historical reconstructions. Only used very cautiously and critically, in conjunction with archeological data, can they provide historical insight.²³

Another type of oral tradition, found most prominently among the Teton Dakota,²⁴ Blackfoot,²⁵ and Kipwa,²⁶ can provide more data concerning the history of the area. These are the so-called winter counts. Originally they were oral documents, no doubt--this is recorded for the Blackfoot²⁷ and the Teton²⁸--but they are best known in conjunction with painted and written charts that served as true native histories.

Recorded Traditions

History may be thought of as the organization by a culture of past time, rather than as any attempt to record or represent the reality of past life. Time itself is a cultural concept that may be considered as the measure of intervals in social life.²⁹ It follows that the very nature of time may be considerably different from one culture to another, and similarly, conceptions of history will

vary widely. Western society has quantified time to the extent that it is an invariant aspect of nature, never changing, ceaselessly progressing from the beginning to infinity, and ticking away irretrievable seconds of eternity. History has all past time firmly under control, seen as a geometric grid of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, eons. The historian's job is to fill in the grid.³⁰ In practice, however, only a very limited number of time periods, in relatively scant detail, are ever actually described. But once they are described, they tend to become important for us.

The Indians of the plains did not objectify time in this manner. As an abstract category, time had no such importance for the Plains Indians as it has for western civilization; it was essentially unimportant.³¹ Time was not conceived of as a universal measure; it had no reality outside the limits of a given social group. Time was defined in terms of duration, not in terms of progress and change. Perhaps we can see this basic attitude towards time reflected in the language as well, in cases where the verbal system lacks tense, utilizing only a particle to mark the future, and thus merging past and present into an undifferentiated whole (e.g., Dakota, Crow).³²

The basic unit of time--other than the relative positions of the sun and stars which were used to mark time within a day, a number of unstandardized names for "moons," and names for seasons--was the "winter," the cycle of seasons from the snows of one year to the snows of the next. Perhaps this reflects the severity of the plains environment, where the crucial test for any social group was how well it could pass the winter without starvation. For the Plains Indians it was above all the "winter" that served as the significant social unit of time. The problem for native Indian historians on the plains, then, was the problem of organizing past winters.

The Teton Dakota provide the best data on native Plains Indian histories. The year was referred to by the term waniyetu, 'winter.'³³ Among the Teton certain men interested in preserving records of the passing years, probably some of them recognized as official "historians," kept native histories. Each year the Teton chronicler, perhaps in consultation with the council of his band, decided on a significant event of the past "winter." This was then recorded as a pictograph on a buffalo hide. These pictographs were generally arbitrary inventions of the individual recorder, simply mnemonic devices. Each pictograph was intended to call to mind a standardized phrase designating the event, such as "many pregnant women died," or "They brought home spotted horses."

These chronicles are called waniyetu iyawapi ('winter counts'). The usual pattern was to begin the count at the center of a buffalo hide, drawing the pictograph representing the earliest year. As the years passed, the pictographs spiralled outwards. Winter counts were passed down from generation to generation, but in most cases it seems that a man's own copy was buried with him, leaving it up to each chronicler to make his own copy. Because of this, only one winter count drawn on a hide has survived (the Lone Dog winter count in the

South Dakota Historical Society). All other winter counts are recorded on rectangular pieces of muslin or paper, or in blank books or ledger books. Approximately thirty counts are known, but they represent variations on about six distinctly different models.

Good Wood, a Teton, characterized the winter counts as being "something put down for every year about their nation."³⁴ (The word used here translated as "nation" was undoubtedly oyate, which is better translated as 'people.') Apparently the event depicted was considered to have some significance for the group in which the winter count was kept. Comparison of winter counts shows wide variations in the types of events chosen to mark the years, reflecting different localities and interests, and clearly indicating that these records were not considered as representative of all the Teton as a single nation. These are local, rather than national, histories.

The lineality of the string of pictographs ensured the chronological sequence. In other types of pictographic recording, the Teton used different conventions to show sequence. Circles were connected by lines, like beads on a string, or were suspended by short vertical lines from a single horizontal line. Pictographs might be drawn in or under the appropriate circles. A small circle might be used in a given context for a year, and a large circle for a wicoicage, 'generation,' which the Dakota considered to be seventy years, the life span of an old man.³⁵ The generation functioned for the Teton as a unit of time comparable to the century.

The major use of the winter count was as a standard for referring to past events. When it was necessary to place any event in time, the winter count pictographs were used like the dates of a European calendar. For example, in 1931 Left Heron, a Teton, described to anthropologist Scudder Mekeel the appointment of the Bear as chief of the Sioux. In order to date the event he stated that it happened in the year of the "Big Distribution," and pointed to a pictograph in his winter count. This represented 1851 (actually 1851-1852, since any "winter" necessarily refers to two calendar years), the year in which the United States government held its first great treaty council with the Western Sioux, near Fort Laramie. The event is depicted on the winter count as a large pile of trade goods, representing the many things that were given to the Indians in exchange for signing the treaty. For the Teton, the gifts seem to have been the most notable aspect of the event.³⁶

The winter counts may be understood in this way: years ("winters") are signified (made significant) by the progression of human (cultural) events, which cycle outwards on the chart from a beginning that can be construed as the origin of the band in which the winter count was kept. By this method the lineal sequence of events was assured within what we may consider to be the time range of Teton Dakota cultural memory. The longest winter count (that of Brown Hat, or Battiste Good) begins in 1700-1701 and ends in 1922-1923.³⁷ Other winter counts range in length from seventy to two hundred years. The counts seem to have begun about the time the Dakotas reached the Missouri River, and the relative beginning dates of the various counts may possibly be correlated with the sequence in

which various Teton tribes and bands entered into what became their historic environment and economy, and with the relative antiquity of the social group in which the count was kept. What the stimulus was for the creation of such records is unknown, and, of course, the date at which the first winter count was recorded pictographically is also unknown. They may well have been preserved entirely by memory until well into the historic time. The first winter count known to be collected was obtained in 1870 or 1871.³⁸

The period of time recorded by these yearly winter counts may be called "cultural time." It is ordered human (i.e., cultural) time that is chronicled by the winter counts. We can contrast this with mythical time, the time before the Dakota existed as a people when animals talked and the supernaturals, including Trickster were still creating and tampering with various aspects of the world. This mythical time is effectively unstructured. In contrast to cultural time, mythical time has no simple lineal structure; events are continually being combined and recombined into new structures to express the same messages.

We may distinguish a third kind of time for the traditional Teton Dakota. I call it "historical time" because it functions much in the same way as history for western civilization, that is, it concerns itself with change. Historical time goes back beyond cultural time, at a tribal or national level, for all the Teton Dakota. It forms a bridge between mythical time and cultural time. Historical time is indicated in the winter counts by larger pictographs, each representing seventy years--a generation. These are placed prior to or separate from the smaller, less complex pictographs representing the winters. The best known example of these "generation" pictographs is the set drawn by Battiste Good; they take his winter count back from 1700 to around 900 A.D. Each seventy-year period is represented by a circle of tipis, suggesting the involvement of all the Dakota in what may be considered a cycle of occurrences culminating in a certain event. One of the earliest events in these historical accounts is the visit of the White Buffalo Calf Maiden who brings the sacred pipe and the religion to the Dakotas. She also brings corn, which drips from her udders. Before this time, according to Left Heron, the Dakotas were like wild animals, running around the prairie without benefit of fire and without social laws.³⁹ Other events included in these historical cycles include the introduction of the horse and the beginning of mounted buffalo hunting. The content of the nine cycles in Good's winter count is repetitive. Their main function is to record the passing of time during a period of change; they attest to the number of generations that passed from the beginning of the Dakota as a people. This native history brings into existence the distinctive features of Dakota culture; afterwards, the Dakota treat these distinctive features of their culture as though they had always existed. Battiste Good also added to his historical cycles other events that became known to him from Whites. For example, he added to the cycle that includes 1492 a pictograph representing Columbus discovering America. Thus some attempt was made to integrate Dakota and White American histories.

It is clear in considering the types of Dakota historical tradition that the unit of time and the type of event recorded are chosen according to the function of the type of "history" (i.e., time organization) being recorded. The sequence of years is lost in the generational cycles of "historical time," and all sequence and even duration is lost in "mythical time," but both function to explain and validate the "cultural time" of the winter counts, which, from the perspective of the Dakota, is culturally timeless, or stable.

The Santee Dakota evidently lacked winter counts in the form of pictographic charts; all the known examples are from the Yankton and Teton groups. It was recorded that the Santee formerly used knotted strings to memorialize events. By the particular type of knot and other markings, the string provided a record of fights, births of children, and other events.⁴⁰ W.P. Clark in The Indian Sign Language also mentions the use of a notched pole to record history, but he is unclear whether this method was used by the Santee or by some other group. The Santee also possessed some record of past events that consisted of a set of marked sticks and recorded such events as comets and battles.⁴¹

Other types of Dakota history may be briefly mentioned. The autobiographical record consisted of a series of detailed pictographs depicting the important events in a man's life; these might be painted on articles of clothing, on the sides of tipis, or on buffalo robes. By the mid-nineteenth century such records were being made in ledger books obtained from Whites, and a distinctive artistic style, influenced by Western art, developed. At the same time the Dakotas became capable of writing their own language, thanks to the efforts of some missionaries. This changed the form of some historical records. Many of the winter counts were transcribed into writing. However, only the memorized cryptic names of the winters were written down, with no attempt to explain events in detail. The special talent of the chronicler still remained his knowledge of the events symbolized by the names. This reflects the paramount importance of the winter counts as calendars to count or mark time, rather than to record historical events. Drawings of men's war deeds became enhanced with explanatory captions, and a few individuals began discursive accounts of their own lives and of various aspects of Dakota culture.⁴² One individual, Bad Heart Bull, produced a synthetic Teton Dakota history in pictographs and words, an account that focuses on the primary value of manliness as the integrative force of traditional Teton culture.⁴³ Like the winter counts, this history is culture history rather than an account of change.⁴⁴

Ethnohistory combines the historian's interest in past events with the anthropologist's concern for describing cultures. I suggest that the writing of history and the writing of cultural studies have as their common goal the presentation of meaningful context. It is in this that ethnohistory has the potential to contribute much to the writing of Indian history. Only by providing the fullest possible context do the events or customs described become intelligible to the reader. In the past, the Dakota possessed some very distinctive ideas about time and history, and about ways of recording it. There seems to be no doubt of the importance of these ideas: they formed the context

in which the Dakota comprehended their relations with other Indians and with Whites as well. Without an understanding of these basic concepts no ethnohistory of the Dakota can possibly be written--history that is meaningful to the Dakota themselves and that treats them as full, intelligent participants in the drama of their own past.

NOTES

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21. Frank Ducheneaux, The Peace Treaty of Fort Laramie, April 29, 1868 (Eagle Butte, S.D. (mimeo), n.d.), p. 1.
22. DeMallie.
23. For a Cheyenne example see Raymond W. Wood, Biesterfeldt: A Post-Contact Coalescent Site on the Northeastern Plains (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, no. 15, 1971).
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28. DeMallie.

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