

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota. By
William K. Powers

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9019v5qt>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 11(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Miller, David Reed

Publication Date

1987-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

nities) Buskirk does not provide a complete picture of the Western Apache economy.

In conclusion, I basically agree with Opler's estimation of *The Western Apache*, which is provided in the foreword. Opler suggests that Buskirk's monograph contributes meaningfully to our knowledge of Western Apache economy, but that to obtain a "full appreciation" of Western Apache culture one should consult the "indispensable" works of Grenville Goodwin, Keith Basso, and Charles Kaut. For an appreciation of the societies and cultures of Chiricahua, Mescalero, and Jicarilla Apache peoples, I would consult the works of Morris Opler.

Scott Rushford

New Mexico State University, Las Cruces

Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota. By William K. Powers. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. 248 pp. pref., intro., illus., tables, apps., notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 Cloth.

This collection of essays presents many of the insights resulting from the years of anthropologist William K. Powers' systematic fieldwork among the Lakota. His long study of the Lakota language, music and ritual life provides the basis for his interpretations and discussions in this volume.

Powers maintains that the Lakota have a body of speech and song texts that is exclusively utilized by medicine men and women—esoteric lexical items removed from the Lakota common person. Powers further contends that two speech communities exist for this exclusive sacred vocabulary, one among medicine people and another between medicine people and the spirit helpers/supernaturals, although in the later case the words used may be more idiosyncratic to the medicine person. Although previous scholars of the Lakota language confirm the existence of a high form of rhetoric, little exists in terms of textual information about this phenomenon. Powers suggests that this discourse among medicine persons, common people, e.g., believers/followers of specific medicine people, and the supernaturals constitutes a sacred language. "In the process sacred language is created out of performance, sometimes public and

sometimes private, and is always perceived to be mysterious, unfathomable, indecipherable, and unintelligible to the common people" (p. 5). The assumption implied by the existence of this religious meta-language is a mediation between common believers and the supernaturals, its acquisition and continuance rooted in a formalized shamanistic tradition akin to a priesthood.

Powers, in stretching the accepted meaning of both the terms language community and language, also admits that "not all sacred persons understand the sacred language of their cohorts" (p. 12). However, sacred persons and their followers, and apprentices to specific medicine persons consider the Lakota language to be layered into sacred and secular categories of discourse without dealing with the issue of mutual intelligibility between communities of believers and specific religious leaders. Powers summarizes the ethnological record and theories about sacred languages, and then provides examples of the phenomenon of Lakota sacred language, mostly drawing from older collected texts. Powers acknowledges the difficulty of gathering data of the sacred parts of this discourse and emphasizes how the vocabulary is used only in ritual contexts, and that only in the area of prayers and songs is the transformation of common Lakota into sacred glimpsed.

However, Powers recognizes that both "common" Lakota people and their medicine persons speak the same language, and suggests it is almost a continuum in which five processes of transformation operate to allow the change and invention of sacred language from the common form: 1) attenuation, 2) affixation, 3) reduplication, 4) inversion, and, 5) stylistics. Throughout this discussion Powers nowhere explains that all of the above processes are found active in the speech patterns of "common" Lakota speakers, but that only in the context of religious cultural information is there an encoding of a specialized idiosyncratic vocabulary being created or inherited via particular medicine persons and a sacred discourse emerges. Powers recognizes that the language of Lakota is in change, with some words becoming archaic and falling out of use, while sacred words may also gradually trickle down into colloquial Lakota, but he does not choose to offer any concrete theory of language change.

The next two chapters are on music and song, one on song terminology and a second analyzing specific sacred song texts. These two, with the richness of his descriptions and analysis of

song texts in their ritual contexts, based on his extensive fieldwork on Lakota music, makes the most substantive contribution in this volume.

The remaining three essays are quite enigmatic. Powers, in an essay entitled, "Containing the Sacred," puts forward his interpretation of a basis for Lakota ritual and belief, stating that categories within the language suggest that they are states or stages of the same phenomenon. He generally glosses belief as the asking and ritual as the doing of the Lakota religious system of thought. Powers does not discuss the Lakota experience of belief or its efficacy in the lives of believers. Without some profile about the particular believers, his discussion remains removed from practice, only based on his assumptions that it occurs. Powers, for example, in discussing the concept, "wakan," is frustrated by the influences of the Walker texts (a collection of texts solicited from Lakota individuals at the turn of the century which have recently been translated from Lakota and edited with commentary (Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine Jahner, eds. James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 1980) upon contemporary Lakota believers, especially younger ones. It is here that any distinction of the separation of the contours of belief from believers clearly emerges in the Powers' discussion. Because of the import of these materials, Powers chooses first to attack the linguistic competence of Dr. J. R. Walker, the physician and amateur ethnographer who lived at Pine Ridge from 1896 to 1914, saying "Walker's grasp of Lakota is wanting" (p. 110), although Walker studied the language for eighteen years. What Powers chooses not to acknowledge is that Walker supplied paper to literate Lakota and that they wrote down texts that they in turn helped Walker to translate. Powers criticizes these historic individuals who served as Walker's informants as not being sacred persons, e.g., medicine men, implying that they could not and did not know the sacred language. They, therefore, in his view could put down only the common person's perspective of religious ideas, and in his opinion can not be considered a solid source for sacred language.

Powers goes on to challenge specific translations and interpretations of the editors of the Walker papers. For example, Powers rejects the interpretation that cekiya, "to pray" is connected to calling out for a relationship, which is symbolized in the cultural symbolism of kinship in Lakota society. Rather, he translates all

words for verbs "to pray" and "to call by a kinship term," rejecting the idea that the supernaturals of Lakota religion are metaphorically related even though they are always addressed by kinship terms of address just as traditional Lakota address each other. He also discusses in detail his disagreement with notions of both "wakan" and "wakantanka" found in an article published by Raymond J. DeMallie and Robert Lavanda ("Wakan: Plains Siouan Concepts of Power," in Raymond Fogelson and Richard Adams, eds. *The Anthropology Of Power: Ethnographic Studies From Asia, Oceania, And The New World*, 1979). Powers does not acknowledge any difference between fluency (performative competence) and the next level—critical to translation—subjective interpretation based on contextual factors and cultural analysis. Instead of offering a detailed descriptive essay formed around how Lakota language contains his notions of what is sacred to Lakota, providing texts for illustration, Powers prefers instead to criticize the interpretations of other Siouanists.

The remaining essays, "Sacred Numbers" and "Shamans and Priests" are similar kinds of discussions in which minor examples are offered to extrapolate from the decoded larger structure of Lakota sacred lore via sacred language. The formulaic transformations presented about sacred numbers do not finally provide evidence that sacred language is anything more than an idiosyncratic vocabulary of specific religions. While the distinctions discussed in these essays range from the curious to the speculative, the impression left is that of manipulation, with his linguistic fluency used as an assertion of total socio-cultural expertise. There is also a sense that some glosses have been made to fit a particular overarching scheme superimposed by Powers on his Lakota data.

Why is it so important to Powers that the Lakota have a proper shamanism comparable to an emergent priesthood? Is it so that the Lakota sacred ones, in order to have a sacred language, and therefore stand at a certain stage of advanced evolution, could also have a formalized and institutionalized religion? The legitimacy of Lakota religious thought and tradition in the eyes of a non-Indian larger world hardly seems the responsibility of Powers. Rather, his linguistic competence is wasted on a debate he creates over glosses of isolated words. The strengths of this volume are clearly demonstrated in his translation and analysis

of collected song texts. This is the power of the middle third of the volume, and the disappointment of the remainder.

David Reed Miller
Fort Peck Community College

Strangers in a Stolen Land: American Indians in San Diego 1850–1880. By Richard L. Carrico. San Diego: San Diego State University Publications in American Indian Studies, No. 2. 1986. 113 pp. \$9.95 Paper.

Strangers in a Stolen Land is a short book which is mostly a collection of anecdotes dealing with Indian history in the Mission Indian area of San Diego County. The text itself is seventy-seven pages long.

It is quite an experience to wander through the mire of fragmentary sources dealing with California Indians, to peruse thousands of pages of newspapers, file folders full of local records, and rolls and sheets of state and federal records on film. Scholars find themselves thanking their sources for being such blatant racists, openly discussing their attitudes toward and approval of acts inflicted on California Indian people. They miss some records, but they still get a good general impression of the social, political and economic environment. The powerful abused the weak, and this was exacerbated by the frontier environment. Dislocation forced the Indians to adapt or starve, and many starved. Those who did adapt assimilated to one degree or another into the money economy around them. This is the experience you get reading *Strangers in a Stolen Land* and its loosely connected series of stories. There should be more.

This is not to say that this book is bad scholarship because that would be unfair, but it is fair to say that it is immature scholarship. Richard L. Carrico is a tourist in Southern California from 1850 to 1880, and his travel log is interesting even if it is not very structured or analytical. He does make mistakes. He is incorrect when he implies that the federal government was benignly negligent in its relationship with the Indians. In fact policy was insidiously and consistently aimed at separating Indians in California from their lands. When historians ignore this fact, they not only