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Wičoȟ'aŋ Kiŋ Uŋkitȟa-Wakȟaŋyeža Awáŋuŋyaŋkapi

The Duty to Protect Our Children - How the Oglala Sioux Tribal Code Encourages Peacemaking in Community Spaces

"We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors; we borrow it from our Children." On this day, as I write this essay, Crazy Horse's statement is felt deeper within my heart. My *Inala* (aunt on my mother's side) is having her first child, which means our entire family will gather to celebrate welcoming a member of the next generation. For my family and the greater Lakota community, the birth of a child isn't only a cause for celebration, it's also an intensely sacred time that calls for a reflection of our place within the *thiwahe* (family). The word for child in Lakota is *Wakȟaŋyeža,* which is constructed from the base word *Wakȟaŋ,* which roughly translates to "spiritually powerful/mysterious." I've heard many relatives mention that *Wakȟaŋyeža* are the perfect manifestation of humanity- they are free of prejudice, naturally curious, and love unconditionally. The Lakota perception of children is paramount to the community structure in which Lakota people raise and nurture the future generations. *Wakȟaŋyeža* are distinctly and delicately cared for and treated with respect for the sacredness they embody. However, in contemporary times, I worry that these ways of nurturing our future are being lost. As of 2024, the National Crimes Against Children Investigators Association finds that although Indigenous children "make up a mere 2% of the total US population," a staggering "15.2% of the child abuse cases come from these groups," (NCACIA) meaning that Indigenous children are around 7 times more likley to face some form of abuse.

While the exact cause of these issues is ambiguous, "literature suggests that colonization marks the commencement" of historical consequences that changed the family structure and dynamics for many Indigenous people (Freeman et al. 456). Whether or not empirical evidence is present, it is an undeniable fact that colonialism sought to, and partially succeeded in, reconstituting Indigenous values and ways of thought. Through various heinous methods, the US has managed to impose and replace existing Indigenous structures with malignant Western counterparts. Expert on human development, Sunil Bhatia, asserts that "Direct colonialism may be long gone, but coloniality is still alive," in the sense that Western structures and perceptions have "the power to interpellate, mark, name, distort, disrupt, invalidate, and diminish other psychologies, other people's humanity, and other histories of self, community and family" (Bhatia 259). Colonialism and the historic trauma that's implicit with it have created deep wounds in Indigenous communities; Bhatia brings light to the idea that the remaining "coloniality" persists, creating obstacles to Indigenous methods of healing. It is especially damaging whenever a community is stripped of the means to support itself by the same power that oppressed it in the first place.

Despite the deep cuts of colonialism, Indigenous resistance always finds a way to overcome barriers to healing. The Oglala Lakota (also known as the Oglala Sioux) have taken steps toward decolonizing imposed societal structures through the implementation of the "*WAKANYEJA NA TIWAHE TA WOOPE,*" or the child and family code. This code aims to apply Lakota principles and philosophies to a Western framework of handling conflicts involving children. The fact that Lakota children face abuse within the community is antithetical to the entire basis of Lakota society. Wakȟaŋyeža na Thiwahe Tȟa-Wóopȟe is not only a recognition, but a direct application of the idea that colonial issues are best resolved through Indigenous

methods. For Indigenous communities throughout Turtle Island, the cultural concept of "peacemaking" has reemerged in many areas of life. Peacemaking is the distinct and specific methodology Indigenous people use to resolve conflict. Unlike its Western counterpart (which, in this context, can be considered the American justice system), peacemaking emphasizes Indigenous values, equality, community, and restorative justice. Niyolpaqui Moraza-Keeswood, a graduate of the Stanford School of Education and member of the Diné and Chichimeca nations, defines Peacemaking as "an Indigenous conflict resolution process which works to address the core issues of conflict to restore balance within oneself, between peers, and among community" (Moraza-Keeswood 6). Peacemaking is not exclusive to only civil disputes; it is a practice that can be applied to common communal disputes, community building, and, in the specific case of the Oglala Lakota, to conflicts regarding raising and nurturing children.

Peacemaking is sown within many traditional Lakota values, and Wakȟaŋyeža na Thiwahe Tȟa-Wóopȟe is meant to facilitate the reclamation of Lakota values that utilize peacemaking. Luther Standing Bear, a devoted Lakota philosopher and activist, beautifully expressed the Lakota's dedication to peace in this statement: "The philosophical ideal of the Lakota was harmony, and the most powerful symbol was that of peace." Upholding this ideal is a primary goal of the values tied to the basis of Lakota society, and this is succinctly reflected throughout *some* aspects of the children and family code. Although the Oglala Sioux tribal code for abused and neglected children is established upon a somewhat "Americanized" basis, the values it chooses to represent are pulled from various facets of Lakota traditional peacemaking philosophy. This paper serves two purposes; first, I will explore how the Oglala Sioux tribal code for abused and neglected children implements and encourages traditional Lakota values regarding peacemaking, and then I will propose ways in which the code can be refined and

improved to better reflect the Lakota ideal of peace. I will argue that the code implements and encourages peacemaking by viewing conflict and community through the lens of Lakota ways of thought and cultural practices. It accomplishes this through three primary modes: the utilization of the Lakota Language to represent the Lakota form of thought, the application of Lakota spiritual practice to existing governing structures, and the emphasis of Lakota kinship when handling conflicts. These modes represent a holistic interpretation of Lakota traditional values that share the same ultimate goal of reinforcing and nurturing a peaceful and thriving community. Afterwards, I will contend that the code can be improved by accommodating other aspects of Lakota culture that also serve to strengthen the community's understanding of peace. I will maintain this by demonstrating how oral tradition and conventional Lakota child-rearing can be included to fortify the code's purpose of supporting and protecting children. This demonstration will serve to illuminate the shortcomings of the code and showcase that there is always more to *decolonize* in these contemporary times, pushing us to a standard of Indigeneity that will not only heal Indigenous communities but also communities around the world. For the candidness and clarity of this paper, I will strictly view peacemaking through the lens of how it relates to conflicts regarding supporting and raising a child in a community. The future of our *Wakȟaŋyeža* depends on our ability to choose and integrate peace in communities where peace has been *stolen* from them.

Language as a Mode of Value Expression

The first step a community can take to reclaim what was stolen is an active effort to not only revitalize, but also *utilize* their Indigenous language to express everyday ideas. The Oglala Lakota code integrates the Lakota language to represent the values and philosophy held at the

basis of our lifestyle. The use of Indigenous language enables the code to express ways of *being* that reflect striving to live a life of peace. Delphine Redshirt, a Lakota author and educator (and also my professor), elegantly articulates that "Language is the roadmap home," meaning Language is not only an essential part of one's culture, but it is also an essential part of how to express it most authentically. *Wakȟaŋyeža na thiwahe tȟa-wóopȟe* or "WNTTW" asserts that the practices it utilizes "are rooted in our history and our language," and it then lists various Lakota terms that "shall govern" the treatment of children. These terms include: *Wočekiye* (faithfulness)*, Wonağiksape* (spirituality)*,* and *Wawoyuonihaŋ* (respect) (WNTTW 4). The use of language, especially with the emphasis on "governing values," immediately allows for the reframing of the document to be centered in a Lakota structure rather than a Western one. While an American code may emphasize fairness, WNTTW's implementation of the Lakota language allows the ideas expressed to expand on that, therefore stressing the importance of spiritual balance, community restoration, and cultural guidance. To further depict the importance of viewing conflict and community through a Lakota perspective, WNTTW also defines many important terms throughout the document in Lakota, with ample explanation of the Lakota interpretations of such concepts. For example, WNTTW refers to Lakota words such as *Oyate, Thiwahe,* and *Tiošpaye* when discussing issues regarding familial or communal conflicts (WNTTW 7). These words each translate to "people," "family," and "extended family," respectively, and their use in the code contextualizes common issues in the Lakota value system. The effect of this is seen when comparing the common language used in non-Lakota documents to the use of the Lakota language in WNTTW. Take the way California's *Penal Code 270 PC*, or its child neglect laws, refer to the relationship between a parent and a child:

> "A '*parent*' of a minor child is broadly defined as whoever is legally responsible for the child's care. This includes: Biological parents; Adoptive parents; Foster parents; Anyone else holding themselves out as a parent; The husband of a pregnant woman, even if the child is not his, if he currently lives with her" (PC 270).

In California's description of a "parent," they use very broad language and depend heavily on the phrase "legally responsible" to portray the significance of the relationship between a parent and a child. Now, in contrast, let's examine WNTTW's description of a *Tiošpaye:*

> "The root of Lakota social structure is the tiospaye–extended family. Tiospaye are comprised of tiwahe, immediate families, as well as individuals adopted through formal ceremony. Equality is a prevailing principle of tiospaye life. Responsibilities are dispersed throughout the tiospaye, and no one is above the laws…Among the strengths of traditional tiospaye life and the strong emphasis on kinship was that children never really became orphans" (WNTTW 4).

Not only is this description of the relationships that comprise a family more specific, but the specific use of *Tiošpaye* reconstitutes the structure to represent communalistic harmony rather than institutional obedience. In *PC 270*, "parent" is more of an institutional concept rather than a communal one; this is because a parent's responsibility to their child is defined through whoever is "legally responsible," making it seem like parenting is done out of expectation rather than compassion and resolve. In contrast, WNTTW grounds itself within cultural values through its definition and use of *Tiošpaye*, as it extends the duty of parenting from a few specific people to an entire community of relatives, hence the idea that a Lakota child is never truly an orphan. The illustration of *Tiošpaye*'s having their own "way of life" with defined principles and responsibilities that vary throughout the *Tiošpaye'*s members places the context of the child's

issues within an entire community rather than a select few. There's a common saying- "It takes a village," and Lakota people take that to heart, and this is visible through the language; the simple use of Lakota words such as *Wakȟaŋyeža* and *Tiošpaye* shifts away from the Western, "legal" way of viewing things to a more community-centric Lakota philosophy.

A skeptic of the Lakota language's impact on WNTTW may argue that using the Lakota language is merely a translation of Western values into Lakota words and adds no practical value to the document. In response to this claim, this is not an interpretation of Western values but rather a transformation of them. The reasoning behind this is embedded in the language itself. Author William K. Powers highlights the Lakota concept of "yulakota, which means to make or transform a foreign idea into something compatible with Lakota culture," meaning that Lakota ways of thinking can take any foreign or incompatible ideas and *transform* them into something that better aligns with Lakota values (Powers 145). Lakota ways of thought may be vastly different than the Western standard, but this doesn't imply that Lakota communities are unable to reinterpret and reinvent Western mechanisms or structures to better serve the community. In his excerpt "Lakota History and Traditionalism," author Raymond Demaille asserts that "Language has served as the key to the definition of their culture," illuminating that language was an integral part of cultural expression for the Lakota (Demaille 11). Language, and its use, is woven into each facet of the heritage. Ultimately, WNTTW's inclusion of the Lakota language shifts the perspective from a Western-centric to a Lakota-based one because the language evokes values held deeply within Lakota heritage. If the language were not present, WNTTW would have greater difficulty expressing other areas of Lakota heritage; therefore, using language in this code is essential as it facilitates the understanding of Lakota ways of thought.

Ceremony and Community Restoration

Building upon a foundation of language, WNTTW emphasizes the importance of the connection between spiritual practices and community restoration and building. By underlining the purpose that ceremony and prayer serve in creating a thriving environment for a child, WNTTW encourages peacemaking through a preventative approach. For example, WNTTW highlights the spiritual significance of the "making of relatives" ceremonies, also known as the *Huŋkayapi* and the *Šawičayapi.* The code asserts that these ceremonies "are purposeful and elaborate," and that "Spirituality is at the root of making relatives; individuals commit themselves before their tiwahe and tiospaye, and before Wakan Tanka" if they wish to be relatives with a person (WNTTW 6). These ceremonies can be formally conducted to introduce a child into a family, meaning it is also a method of adoption in Lakota culture. By grounding what is usually seen as a purely institutional action (adoption) in Lakota heritage through the practice of ceremony, WNTTW fosters a more nourishing social environment for children. Reframing adoption as a sacred and spiritually powerful action for both the child and the family stresses the importance of being in relationship with one another in communal space. Rather than simply signing a paper, the appreciation of ceremony builds a stronger sense of community and responsibility within the entire family. It underlines that there are no *adopted children* in Lakota culture, just *children*. WNTTW is deliberate in its decision to include ceremony within the code, as it comments under the "Description of Traditional Resolution of Child and Family Issues" that "Spiritual ceremonies and rituals play a significant role in the proper upbringing of children," and that Adults have not only the right but the "responsibility to ensure that young men and women undergo the appropriate ceremonies and rituals" so they may be "well–mentally, physically, and spiritually." WNTTW also highlights that ceremonies "play a significant role in

addressing child and family issues," when "mental or physical anguish or abuse" is present within a child (WNTTW 22). The addition of ceremony within governing structures is an essential instrument of community building and healing in Lakota culture. Their practice gives families and communities time to meditate and reflect on their current situation and how they've changed throughout their lives. Ceremonies serve as spiritual roadmaps to laying a foundation of respect, integrity, and love within communities that not only serve to give space for self-reflection but also act as a preventative measure for conflict in the future. As children age, ceremonies mark times in their lives where they must take on new responsibilities and navigate new perspectives, but they also signal that they have a support system while this happens. Making children aware of all of the resources and people available to them for uncertain times to come can make all the difference when conflicts arrive.

In addition to building nurturing spaces for growing children, the emphasis placed on spirituality and ceremony allows WNTTW to embed a vital aspect of Lakota heritage within the practices it highlights. Lakota culture appreciates the chaos and uncertainty implicit within nature; the idea that we do not have control over anything but ourselves lies at the heart of the heritage. As Demaille asserts, the Lakota people "lived close to the unpredictableness of nature", and he quotes Luther Standing Bear, stating that the "mental reaction of the Lakota" to uncertain events was "one of unity" (Demaille 8). Lakota spirituality isn't just about practicing ceremony, it is also about deviating the way we think about events and change within our life; change, and therefore conflict, are inevitable events in anyone's life, so harmony is only achievable if this fact of life is not only acknowledged but respected. This ideology is essential to understanding how Lakota spirituality reinforces societal structures that encourage peacemaking as a vital part of life in a community. Lakota communities do not place taboos on communal conflicts and

frame the “ideal society” as one completely free of conflict. Instead, conflict within the community is something that Lakota people not only expect but also take advantage of, as our spirituality informs us that change is something we must unify with, not hide or run away from. When disputes are viewed through this lens of spirituality present within WNTTW, they can be approached as natural, navigable, and something that the entire *Tiošpaye* can be a part of. To highlight the consequences of handling conflict without guidance from Lakota spirituality, Vi Waln, a Lakota woman and journalist, sheds light on the issue of children being incarcerated on the reservation. She states in response to a couple of Lakota youth being persecuted, “We can continue to applaud the police for putting children in jail, or we could work to improve the conditions our young people are living in” and she asserts “When you’re happy to see our children go to jail because they have nothing at home, you have no business preaching about how children are sacred” (Waln). Waln’s enraged contention brings forth a noteworthy issue regarding the lack of spiritual guidance when handling communal conflicts; if Lakota people do not construct their own means of handling conflict, they must rely on institutional practices handed down to them by the US. This results in an environment where conflict and change are swiftly handled through incarceration rather than being a more communal issue. It is much simpler to throw a child in jail for their actions, but it is heaps more meaningful to approach this situation with a perspective informed by our spirituality so we may focus on restorative healing rather than quick “justice.” Ultimately, WNTTW’s integration of spiritual values into governing structures enables a reconstitution of Western institutional structures into Lakota spaces that harbor communication, self-reflection, and guidance. By implementing Lakota spirituality, WNTTW strives toward preventative peacemaking by encouraging the creation of an environment that views conflict as a natural phenomenon rather than demonizing it.

Kinship and Building Familial Connections

WNTTW also strives toward preventative peacemaking by emphasizing the Lakota view of conflict and seeks to build more connected communities by integrating the Lakota perception of kinship. In Lakota society, understanding one's place in the *Tiošpaye* and *Thiwahe* is essential for the entire community's functionality. The Lakota understanding of what it means to hold titles such as being a sibling, a parent, or a cousin is extremely distinct. It acknowledges that each member of a *Tiošpaye* is going to have a different relationship with one another. As mentioned before, WNTTW has claimed that being a part of a *Tiošpaye* is a way of life. To underline the reciprocal responsibilities held within a Lakota family structure, WNTTW incorporates the "Tiwahe na Tiospaye Ta Wowasake," or the "Traditional Family Rights," in which "tiwahe and tiospaye groups" are granted "certain rights" to help with the act of raising children. These rights define the commitments and obligations a family has when building a community; for example, the code defines "*Igluhapi,"* or the right to self-sufficiency and privacy (WNTTW 17). By laying out specific values informed by Lakota kinship practices, WNTTW builds an environment that encourages respect and love throughout the entire community. Rather than simply defining the responsibilities held only by the parents, the integration of the reciprocal responsibilities held within the *Tiošpaye* and the *Thiwahe* builds a roadmap for a healthy community.

Along with implementing the idea of mutual obligations within a family setting, utilizing Lakota kinship ideals in WNTTW stresses the importance of mediation in conflict. WNTTW promotes the parents to be exclusive in disciplining and correcting the children, ideally, and that if any other member of the *Tiošpaye* witnesses misbehavior, it is to be "reported immediately or

as soon as possible to the affected parents" (WNTTW 21). However, the code also acknowledges that the parent-child relationship isn't always perfect. To prevent "issues from reaching crisis proportions," WNTTW asserts that these issues "are addressed by the parents' parents," and in "in the absence of the grandparents, the parents' aunts and uncles" take that responsibility (WNTTW 22). Mediating familial parent-child conflicts by other family members is vital to ensuring a safe and nourishing environment for the child. Constant supervision and mediation of not only children, but also how they are treated by their parents, reflects the *Tiošpaye* life that is a fundamental component of Lakota kinship. Underlining that Grandparents, Uncles, and Aunts each have a responsibility to children who aren't their own shows how Lakota kinship cultivates beneficial communal habits of peacemaking. Ultimately, the integration of Lakota kinship within WNTTW catalyzes the process of building a connected community. It accomplishes this by using traditional views of Lakota family duties to highlight the reciprocal responsibilities held between members of the *Tiošpaye* and the idea that every adult in the family has the right and obligation to mediate parent-child conflicts. Similar to the use of ceremony in WNTTW, the implementation of Lakota kinship sheds light on the fact that Lakota ways of life are *very* communal and place a more distinct definition of what it means to be in a "family" than Western counterparts of mere "blood relation."

Reinforcing Lakota Values

While WNTTW's use of traditional Lakota values and ways of thought encourages communal peacemaking and a healthy environment for children, I feel there is always something to improve. Although substantial, WNTTW's implementation of Lakota culture only scratches the surface of how Lakota people approach conflict, especially those regarding children. In this

subsection, I will outline two ways I find WNTTW can improve and reinforce its use of Lakota heritage and ways of thought. First, I will underline the rich oral history of the Lakota people and how it can be implemented to support preventative peacemaking. Then, I will highlight the traditional child-rearing practices of the Lakota people to show how they support community building. While these are not the only ways the code can improve, these are the methods that came to mind first; ultimately, I aim to provide WNTTW with simple ways to improve their use of Lakota philosophies so that the value system is more strongly expressed within the code.

To begin, WNTTW can utilize traditional oral history and stories to accentuate preventative peacemaking regarding raising a child. Lakota heritage is full of various oral stories that have been passed down for generations. Like many other cultures, each story has a primary lesson or piece of information that it shares through the narrative. For example, the *Iktomi* stories, a series of various tales that describe the adventures of the spider trickster spirit and his shenanigans. Other stories, such as the one that tells the story of the sacred pipe or the Lakota origin story, provide insight into our complex spiritual beliefs and how they inform the way Lakota people live life. While these can be viewed as "just stories," traditionally, they were essential in communicating the Lakota value system and the lessons held within it to children. WNTTW doesn't need to tell these stories themselves, but what they can do is *encourage Tiošpaye* to tell these stories to their children throughout their childhood. For example, they can amend the code in the beginning sections to provide adequate details of which stories to tell and what lesson they teach. While it seems like a small addition to the code, the implementation of Lakota oral history does two things to encourage preventative peacemaking. First, it provides a method to teach Lakota children "right from wrong" in a more fun and interactive way, rather than relying on discipline as the main opportunity to instruct children. Using oral history to show

children the Lakota value system prevents children from living and acting in ways that *do not* reflect Lakota values. That is another benefit of the use of oral history- it is a way to culturally immerse children in Lakota ways of thought and philosophy. Engagement with the culture is essential for the well-being of Lakota children, and oral history is another way to accomplish this. Both of these advantages ultimately provide adults with another method of instructing children while immersing them within Lakota culture, which acts as a preventative measure for problematic behavior in the future.

Along with the use of oral history, WNTTW can also use traditional Lakota child-rearing to strengthen community building. While WNTTW briefly touched upon traditional child-rearing with their mention of "*Wowahokunkiye*" or " to advise, counsel, teach, or lecture" (WNTTW 21), there is much more to cover when it comes to the Lakota way of raising children. For example, Lakota adults would often encourage critical thinking and self-control in children at an early age. The Akta Lakota museum and Cultural Center asserts that "one of the first lessons a Lakota child learned in the old days was self-control and self-restraint," especially in the presence of their adult mentors (Akta Lakota). Another important method of child-rearing that was encouraged in traditional life was the ability to learn through observation and the emphasis on the importance of the land. Delphine Redshirt would often tell me that Lakota people are *very* observant, and that many of their lessons reflect the behavior of other beings. For example, Lakota people learned the importance of compassion and community through observing the buffalo and how they behave in their herds. The ability to learn through observation is not only an essential skill for any human, but also teaches the importance of the natural world and all it has given us without expecting anything in return. WNTTW can implement these more traditional means of raising children by amending the code and laying out how adults can encourage this behavior in

children early on. For example, much like the mention of *Wowahokunkiye,* the code can also describe the importance of guiding Lakota children to be observant and empathetic. Ultimately, inspiring this behavior in children will not only support in raising strong members of the community, but it will also help the entire community grow with it. The participation in Lakota culture is reciprocal in the sense that the mentors who engage in guiding Lakota children will also immerse themselves in Lakota culture and reinforce the very values they are teaching for themselves. Therefore, engagement in traditional child-rearing is an opportunity to bring the entire *Oyate* closer to each other and Lakota culture.

Moving forward, for Our Children

For the Lakota, children are everything. The act of raising and loving children is not taken lightly, and there is ample emphasis placed on the *correct* way of doing so throughout many elements of the culture. In contemporary society, it is important to acknowledge that the traditional ways of raising children and handling conflicts surrounding them are almost lost. The "Wakȟaŋyeža na Thiwahe Tȟa-Wóopȟe" is not only a recognition of the need to change, but an active effort to do so. Although it builds from a Western framework of an official "code" or "document," its use of Lakota culture and ways of thought is substantial enough to enable it to strive toward Lakota ways of peacemaking.

In conclusion, the "Wakȟaŋyeža na Thiwahe Tȟa-Wóopȟe" utilizes aspects of Lakota heritage such as the Lakota language, ceremony and spirituality, and kinship to encourage peacemaking through community building and preventative action. It is also evident that including traditional oral history and child-rearing is an effective way to improve the cultural expression present within the document. Ultimately, the code is an important step forward in

moving away from the inadequate practices imposed upon Lakota people by their Western counterparts and striving toward Indigenous excellence informed by traditional practices. The future of Lakota people depends on our ability to provide a nourishing environment for our children, our *Wakȟaŋyeža*, and each step toward decolonization brings us closer to such a goal.

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