Cultural Paper: The Lakota Nation

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The Lakota Nation is a part of the larger Sioux Nation. Like the other 500+ Native American tribes, their history is rich with tradition and culture. However, like many of the other tribal groups, their history is also filled with many challenges and hardships. These struggles ranged from the destruction of their culture and traditions through assimilation and boarding schools, to outright war and constant physical and legal battles. Although the Lakota persevered through these tragedies, they suffered many losses. Not only did they lose loved ones, they lost land and nearly lost their culture. Even in contemporary America, the Lakota people are not fully out of the woods yet, but they stay strong by maintaining their traditions.

Before the Lakota tribes were faced with the horrors brought on by the settlers, they lived a life full of tradition and beliefs. One staple in the lives of the Lakota was the buffalo. The Lakota depended greatly on the buffalo, as it provided a variety of uses. Buffalo contributed to the nomadic lifestyle of the Lakota (Lakota Sioux, n.d.). The Lakota would go out for buffalo hunts, where the men would hunt the buffalo, and the women would then divide the parts of the animal for many uses. One hunting tactic the Lakota men used to hunt was to drive the buffalo off cliffs, where the women waited below to retrieve the remains of the slain animal. (Lakota Sioux, n.d.) Besides food, the Lakota had more practical uses for the animal as well. They used the hide to build their tipis and used other parts of the animal for clothing and weapons. The buffalo skull also served as a religious symbol in their ceremonies. (Akta Laktoka Museum & Cultural Center, n.d.)

The Lakota also had many religious ceremonies that they performed. One of these was the Sun Dance, which was a ceremony to bring harmony to the people. (Lakota Sioux, n.d.) Another big part of Lakota religion is the Seven Sacred Rites. According to tribal elders, these rites were bestowed by a woman who was discovered by hunters. She gifted to the people the Sacred Buffalo Calf pipe and tells them about the spiritual ways of the Seven Sacred Rites. (Encyclopedia of Religion, 2005) The Lakota were to smoke the pipe in a time of need, and the smoke is a representation of their prayers being carried up into the skies. (Encyclopedia of Religion, 2005) The Lakota send their prayers to Wakan Tanka, or the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit is not actually known to be a single entity, but a collection of spirits. These spirits are in the form of natural elements. Lakota religion is classified as being pantheistic, which means they believe that their “god is all”. (Lakota Sioux, n.d.)

Along with a strong religious belief, the Lakota also held several values in high regard. A large part of Lakota culture was generosity. “What you give away, you keep; what you keep you lose” was a historic saying among the Lakota. (Akta Laktoka Museum & Cultural Center, n.d.) The Lakota believed that you should not just focus on yourself and had a big emphasis on community. Interestingly, at big ceremonies the Lakota would even set out their family’s belongings outside of their home. (Akta Laktoka Museum & Cultural Center, n.d.) The community could take anything they needed, and this was a truly virtuous act. Another value of the Lakota was that of fortitude. They believe you should face all challenges with strength and courage. They also believed that success is something that is shared by everyone. That is, if you were better than someone, you are a role model and should use your skills to achieve your personal goals. You do not compete with one another; everyone is to help each other succeed. (Akta Laktoka Museum & Cultural Center, n.d.) Just as important was the value of wisdom. The wisdom of elders is of vital importance to the Lakota. This is how their culture and beliefs were passed down. But to the Lakota, wisdom is not just knowledge, and it does not automatically come with age. Wisdom is earned over one’s lifetime. Wisdom also means that you understand your values and culture, and can incorporate them into your own life, as well as pass it to others. (Akta Laktoka Museum & Cultural Center, n.d.) The combination of these religious practices and values were large parts of Lakota culture. However, the Lakota would soon find their culture, land, and very way of life was about to be challenged and nearly destroyed by a foreign threat.

Although the Lakota are native to the land, the arrival of the settlers brought an onslaught of challenges and horrors for them to endure. When the settlers arrived on native land, they did not view the natives as regular people. They viewed them as savages, not knowing about their rich history. They didn’t even attempt to try and understand the beautiful culture of the natives. Because they used practices unlike those of the settlers, they began the process of assimilation. The settlers wanted to overpower the Lakota and all natives, stripping them of their culture and language, and assimilating them into the western ways.

The goal of the settlers was to “kill the Indian and save the man”. This mean that the settlers wanted to convert the natives from their traditional ways. One way of doing this was by forcefully taking Lakota children from their families and sending them to boarding schools. These schools were a horrendous environment for the children. The children were forbidden to use their native language, and to dress traditionally. (Upstander Project, 2020) According to an account by Luther Standing Bear, who claims to be one of the first students at the Carlisle boarding school, drew a chilling picture of life at the boarding school. (Upstander Project, 2020) He stated, “we went to school to copy, to imitate; not to exchange languages and ideas”. (Upstander Project, 2020) The children of that school were only subject to learning the western culture. They were forced to abandon their own culture they’d known all their lives. Children at the boarding school were also forced into doing labor. Girls were put to work cooking and cleaning, while the boys worked industrial jobs. Sadly, many children perished under these harsh conditions. The boarding schools were not intended for education, they were intended for the destruction of their culture.

On top of losing their culture, the Lakota also had their land taken from them. One of the first ways this was done was with the Allotment Act. This split the native lands into individual allotments. The land would be held in a trust for 25 years. This was an attempt by the government to convert the natives from nomads to agricultural people. (Stromberg, 2010) They wanted the natives to learn to use the land effectively before they were allowed individual control again. The loss of land by tribes including the Lakota totaled in the tens of millions of acres. (Stromberg, 2010) Another effort by the government to take native land was through the creation of the Termination Policy. The government basically wanted to just assimilate the natives as quickly as possible. They cited that they felt the natives at the time were ready to be part of American society and didn’t need federal protection. (Sioux Nation Relief Fund, 2015) This was brought to fruition in 1953 by Congress. At this time, a staggering 109 tribes were terminated, 12,000 people lost their tribal affiliation, and 2.5 million acres of native land were removed from protected status. (Sioux Nation Relief Fund, 2015) This was another massive loss for the natives, and this wasn’t the end of the hardships for the natives.

The Lakota also faced many physical conflicts. One of the most notable conflicts they faced was the massacre at Wounded Knee. This was caused by the Sioux Wars, which had started shortly after the Ft. Laramie Treaty was signed. The Sioux Wars had numerous battles against US forces and their attempts at assimilation. At the end of the Sioux Wars, the government ordered that native chiefs be arrested, and while the army trying to arrest Lakota chief Sitting Bull, they killed him. (Sioux Nation Relief Fund, 2015) After Sitting Bull’s death, Big Foot gathered his troop and went to intercept the US troops. On December 29, they were having talks with the officers, when a shot was heard. The US troops the proceeded to fire on all the attending natives. When the gunfire stopped, over 100 men, women, and children had been murdered, and the battle also left many wounded. The Lakota and many other native tribes encountered many more massacres at the hands of US soldiers. Even after all these events, the native struggles were not over yet.

Many issues persist for natives in contemporary America. One major issue is poverty. In one report, nearly 50% of Pine Ridge residents were below poverty level. (Stromberg, 2010) One reason for this is that it’s difficult for small businesses to thrive in these areas. This is usually due to distance and resources. Studies also show that most employment comes from government sources, such as BIA jobs. (Stromberg, 2010) Another issue natives face in the modern age is a struggle between native and federal government. According to research, some native governments issues with self-determination. Where politics can get in the way of native’s interests. Some BIA programs have also been reported to not support the Lakota and other native nations very well. (Stromberg, 2010) Also, the federal government can seem unconcerned about native issues. Usually any native assistance bills will get immediately shot down among the usual Washington D.C. politics. A big problem for the Lakota nation faces in contemporary America is that assimilation was semi-successful in destroying their culture. Ivan Star Comes Out is a Lakota journalist was an attendee of a native boarding school. (Star Comes Out, 2020) He states that the Lakota culture is “continually being eroded”. (Star Comes Out, 2020) He also mentions concerns that a lot of Lakota youth do not know have a lot of knowledge about treaties. He says that much of the youth doesn’t know that certain pieces of land have been granted to them. (Star Comes Out, 2020) This can be attributed to the lack of native education in contemporary America. There are very few curricula that teach our native youth about their culture and history. Growing up, the only thing I was taught about natives was the usual Thanksgiving stories. I was never aware of the atrocities committed against native peoples. I and many others believe that the government should be supporting native education.

The Lakota nation has been subjected to numerous injustices throughout history. Unfortunately, they still face many struggles in contemporary America. They have lost land, people, culture, and spirituality. However, had they been allowed to flourish and teach the settlers about their ways instead of being suppressed, many of these tragedies would not have occurred. Although native culture is often overlooked, each native nation is rich with history, and they will continue to fight to keep it alive.

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