

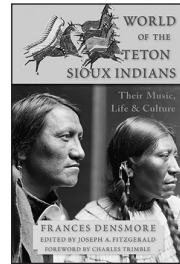
World of the Teton Sioux Indians: Their Music, Life, and Culture

By Frances Densmore, Edited by Joseph A. Fitzgerald

Foreword by Charles Trimble

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Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos



Against a backdrop of the cultural extinction of the American Indians, and the apparently imminent end of the “Indian race” that marked the early part of the 20th century when one saw the banning of the First Peoples’ tribal languages and their religious practices through programs of forced assimilation, there was a lesser-known remarkable cultural resurgence taking place. In August of 1913, groundbreaking anthropologist Frances Densmore met with two Teton (or Lakota) Sioux warriors, Old Buffalo and Swift Dog in McLaughlin, South Dakota to record Native American lifeways before the reservation era began. Old Buffalo was recorded to have spoken the following words about this process:

We come to you as from the dead. The things about which you ask us have been dead to us for many years. In bringing them to our minds we are calling them from the dead, and when we have told you about them they will go back to the dead, to remain forever. (p. 235)

It is in this spirit that Frances Densmore’s *World of the Teton Sioux Indians* came alive, giving voice to numerous firsthand accounts of the

traditional Teton Sioux world—such as religion, dreams and visions, healing, military societies, buffalo hunting and social dances.

This abridged edition was originally published in 1918 under the title *Teton Sioux Music*, as Bulletin 61 of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, and was held to be a landmark in the study of ethnomusicology. The first edition contained a great deal of technical material that made accessing the valuable cultural dimensions of this work more cumbersome and was less useful to the non-musical specialist. In this version this material has been extracted to allow the other facets of the traditional Teton Sioux culture to come to the foreground. An accolade for Densmore's book by Professor Raymond J. DeMallie affixed to the back cover speaks to its importance: "One of the most significant ethnographic works ever published on the Sioux." Another weighty endorsement for this book is by Professor William K. Powers, who wrote: "One of the few monographs universally regarded as a true classic of Lakota culture." Also included in this abridged edition are over 130 color and black-and-white illustrations which further illuminate the world of the Teton Sioux.

Densmore reminds readers about the profound spiritual message contained within traditional American Indian songs that cannot be taken at face value without the loss of deeper meaning: "The words of certain songs are in a 'sacred (esoteric) language'" (p. xxii). One might add that this "sacred language" is the timeless wisdom transmitted through Tradition, which is not man-made. "[S]acred language'...is unintelligible to those who are not initiated into its mysteries." (p. 76)

Ceremonies

In order to understand the Native American religion one needs to bear in mind that the Great Spirit or Great Mystery (*Wakan-Tanka*) was both omnipresent in the world of creation and also simultaneously beyond it. It was through Pte San Win—the "White Buffalo Calf Woman"—that the Teton Sioux received the seven sacred rites, such as the sacred pipe and the sacred ritual of the Sun Dance. White Buffalo Calf Woman is reported to have given the following message:

I represent the Buffalo tribe, who have sent you this pipe. You are to receive this pipe in the name of all the common people [Indians]. Take it, and use it according to my directions. The bowl of the pipe is red stone—a stone not

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