

10-16-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Gould, Roxanne and Rock, James (2017) "Once Upon a Toxic Sanctuary: Partnering to Restore and Reclaim a Dakota Sacred Site," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 8. Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/vol4/iss3/8>



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## Once Upon A Toxic Sanctuary: Partnering To Restore And Reclaim A Dakota Sacred Site

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### Abstract

In this article, we examine the role of partnerships as they relate to the destruction and reconstruction of *Wakan Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park as a Dakota sacred feminine, origin, birth site through a theoretical lens of critical Indigenous pedagogy of place (Trinidad , 2016) and partnership studies (Eisler, 2005). We discuss the deep historical, social, psychological, and cultural relationship the Dakota have to this sacred site and the challenge of partnering with non-Dakota entities to restore *Wakan Tipi*/Indian Mounds Park from a toxic waste dump to a spiritual sanctuary.

Keywords: Indigenous Sacred Site, Dakota Sacred Site, Partnering with Indigenous Peoples

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## INTRODUCTION

*Wakan Tipi* or *Wakanyan Tipi* is a large cave with a spring-fed lake that flows from the mouth of the cave in the limestone bluffs below Indian Mounds Park in St. Paul, Minnesota. *Wakan/Wakanyan Tipi* translates as “Sacred Dwelling Place.” *Tipi* is both a noun for a dwelling place and a verb for “they live.” *Wakanyan* is the adverb for how they/we live (Gould & Rock, 2016).

After two hundred and fifty-plus years of ecofemicide, or destruction and contamination of the feminine womb cave and surrounding area, Dakota people still consider *Wakan Tipi* their birthplace as where the Creator first placed their people on

Mother Earth. According to Gould and Rock (2016), *Wakan Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park were not just a place of death as the archaeologists claim, but first and foremost a place of birth. When the Dakotas left their stellar home near the backbone of the buffalo constellation, they came to *Maka Ina*/Earth Mother. In fact, to the Dakota, *Wakan Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park are the embodiment of *Maka Ina*/Mother Earth. So they created a pregnant, belly-like mound up on the bluff and were then birthed from the womblike cave of *Wakan Tipi* at the base of the bluff even with flowing birth water emerging onto *Maka Ina*/Mother Earth (p. 226). Today, the *Wakan Tipi* and Mounds Park origin site is now on a healing path toward environmental, cultural, and possibly even spiritual health.

Since the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* is housed at the University of Minnesota, which is near the Dakota origin center of the universe, *Makoche Chokaya Kin*, it seems appropriate and necessary to consider partnerships from the first human eyes and voices of this land where two rivers join at *Bdote* and where water reflects sky in *Mni Sota Makoche*, where the Dakota have lived for over ten millennia since the melting of the glaciers. At the root of the word “Dakota” is *koda*, which is friend or ally. An alliance, society, or partnership is *Okodakichiyapi*. *Mitakuyapi* are relatives, including all the non-human, non-two-legged variety of relatives as well. The meaning of *Mihun̄kake* or *Mihun̄kakan̄* is “my ancestors,” while the ancestral origin stories are called *hunkakan*. Family, *tiwahe*, and extended family, *tiyoshpaye*, are also by their nature an alliance, society, or partnership by blood and marriage, *kichiyuzapi Wakan̄*. As members of the *Ocheti Shakowin Oyate*, or Seven Star-Fire Nations (4 Dakota, 2 Nakota, and 1 Lakota), the Dakota concept of partnership is synonymous with that of an ally and/or relative. It is said that the *Ocheti Shakowin Oyate* began as one people in the area now known as St. Paul and Minneapolis, just a few miles from the main campus of the University of Minnesota. As a land grant institution which began in 1851, this is relatively recent in relationship to the 15,000 years of Dakota presence.

So what happened to the Dakota peoples who lived in consummate relationship to their origin birth site, and how did this spiritual sanctuary become a toxic waste dump? The answer is the invasion of settler colonialism which began in 1679. From that time until 1862,

...the Dakotas made every attempt to peacefully coexist with Europeans. But the loss of tens of millions of bison, the Dakota's main food source, and tens of millions of acres of their original homeland pushed the Dakota to the brink of starvation and they were forced to go to war. After fierce fighting, the Dakota men were captured, rounded up and convicted in five-minute so-called trials. These resulted in the hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men—the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. Minnesota governor Alexander Ramsey ordered any remaining Dakota to be exiled from the state. To insure that they would never return, Ramsey posted a bounty of up to \$200 on the scalps of all Dakotas. (Gould & Rock, 2016, p. 231, summarized from Waziyatawin, 2008).

After the Dakota genocide and exile, there were no Dakotas left in *MniSota Makoche* to protect and tell the stories about the sacred origin sites. Soon after the exile, the new settler colonial oligarchies began the process of trying to erase the Indigenous presence by attacking the Dakota centers of power. The entrance of *Wakan Tipi* cave, which housed the ancient petroglyphs related to the Dakota stellar origin story and constellations, was destroyed to make way for James J. Hill's railroad, and all nineteen mounds on the bluff above the cave were removed for a street and housing development. This beautiful sacred sanctuary that rested in the embrace of pristine limestone bluffs and the Mississippi River for thousands of years became a toxic waste dump within two decades of "progress". "...[T]he oak savannah was destroyed and the wetlands were drained and poisoned. *Wakan Tipi* became a place for throwaway things and throwaway people who were no longer welcome in society" (Gould & Rock, 2016, p. 230).

After a century and a half of urban development around *Wakanj Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park area, residents began to advocate for the clean-up of the site. In spite of the fact that this site had been designated a national park in 1893, it remained a toxic waste dump until 2003 (Gould & Rock, 2016).

Today only ten percent of the Dakota people live in their original homeland, and those who remain live on only 1% of 1% of their original homeland far from *Wakanj Tipi* Cave and Indian Mounds Park, but their love for their homeland and this sacred origin site remains unwavering. Because *Wakanj Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park are no longer under Dakota control, it remains paramount that their voices be heard.

## WHAT IS PARTNERSHIP?

The critical question regarding partnering with settler stakeholders is: Given the history of treaty making and breaking with the Dakota and other Indigenous nations, to what extent was or is it ever advisable or necessary for Indigenous descendants to enter into partnerships or covenants with non-Indigenous descendants? Even if protocol is adhered to and ceremony takes place before such an undertaking with the understanding that the descendants will honor said partnerships in perpetuity, is this ever a desired state of partnership or attempted re-partnership? The challenge of breaking this 500-year system of dominance over Indigenous peoples based in fear, coercion, violence, patriarchy, and top-down authoritarian control is daunting (Center for Partnership Studies, 2017).

The Lower Phalen Creek Project (LPCP) has been one of the true partnership organizations in the revitalization process of *Wakanj Tipi*. Melanie Kleiss, executive director of the LPCP, discussed the concept of partnership.

The term partnership on its own is defined as two entities agreeing to cooperate to advance mutual interests. It is a closed, Western definition and very... self-interested. The interests belong to the entities, and the cooperation is only to further those

interests. But Western science, medicine, politics, economics, and many other fields have been gradually learning - something Indigenous cultures have understood for millennia - that all things are highly connected. Our actions have a ripple effect through our communities and through the generations. Therefore, although a partnership is slightly more enlightened than acting only in one's own interest, we need a better definition to represent that which we seek through cooperation. (Melanie Kleiss, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

Since at least 1999, Dakota, Lakota, and other Indigenous up-standers have been at the table in regard to the restoration of *Wakanj Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park, but it has not been easy. Before cultural and environmental partnerships and healing can occur, Dakota protocol and leadership upon Dakota homelands must be acknowledged, and the Dakota history of their relationship to this site and *Mni Sota Makoche* must be recognized, including the history of genocide. Dakota scholar and historian Waziyatawin (2008) describes the challenges of engaging in partnership with non-Indigenous partners.

The difficulty of this should not be underestimated. It is emotionally and spiritually exhausting to dwell in such a difficult space. In addition, many non-Dakota people may become overwhelmed by the information and consequently believe they should not have to hear about it more than once. (Waziyatawin, 2008, p. 93).

She continues,

It is deep understanding, however, that will provide the way out of the suffering for us all. That is when all of us will achieve a state of empowerment. It is extraordinarily important then, when Dakota people engage in truth-telling, that our allies stand up to support us. (Waziyatawin, p.94).

According to Melanie Kleiss, what is needed is a cooperative approach to partnering in which hegemony and dominance are abandoned.

Imagine if we reject the destructive Western assumption and approach the definition of a partnership from the opposite perspective. What would a community look like if its partnerships were defined as two entities discovering the best ways to support one another? (Melanie Kleiss, personal communication, Aug. 1, 2017).

### **AN EXAMPLE OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERING**

In 2010, the authors took a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators to Bolivia to examine the decolonization work being carried out by Evo Morales, the only Indigenous leader of a colonial nation state in the western hemisphere. His leadership at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia in April 2010 inspired many partnerships through the creation of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth. This historic agreement provided us with the incentive to make this journey. The Declaration states:

We, the peoples and nations of Earth... are all part of Mother Earth, an indivisible, living community...interrelated and interdependent ... gratefully acknowledging that Mother Earth is the source of life, nourishment and learning and provides everything we need to live well; recognizing ...the capitalist system and all forms of depredation, exploitation, abuse and contamination have caused great destruction [to] Mother Earth, putting life as we know it ...at risk...[We are] conscious of the urgency of taking decisive, collective action to transform structures and systems that cause climate change and other threats to Mother Earth.... (Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth, 2010).

At the same time Evo Morales was able to pass a new Bolivian constitution based on the concept of “living well” with similar ideals as the Universal Declaration of the Rights of

Mother Earth. The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, emphasizes the idea of not only partnership, but cooperation, based on the relationship of interdependence with all of our living relatives including Earth herself.

It is imperative that we forge a new system that restores harmony with nature and among human beings. And in order to achieve balance with nature, there must first be equity among human beings. Morales proposes to the peoples of the world the recovery, revalorization, and strengthening of the knowledge, wisdom, and ancestral practices of Indigenous Peoples, which are affirmed in the thought and practices of “Living Well,” recognizing Mother Earth as a living being with which we have an indivisible, interdependent, complementary, and spiritual relationship.

At a speech to the G77 + China at the United Nations in May 2010, Morales said, “This is our strength: unity through diversity” (Morales, 2010). In addition, Morales recognized the need to restore the Indigenous concept of *chacha-warmi*, or the reciprocal, gender-energy balance between Sky and Earth, which has been written into the Bolivian constitution. Women now comprise fifty percent of the Bolivia’s legislative seats, from the Andean *altiplano* to the Amazonian lowlands (Rousseau, 2011).

It was in our meeting with the Bolivian Vice Minister of Decolonization that our partnership was birthed. After the Indigenous protocols of introduction and gift giving, intense conversation ensued. Vice minister Esperanza Huanca spoke about the challenges of decolonizing a colonial nation state. She stated that “There can be no decolonization without depatriarchalization. Things are out of balance with only men leading...leading the world to destruction. Earth and Sky need each other to complement.” (Esperanza Huanca, personal communication, June 2010).

It was during this meeting that we were invited to create a partnership agreement to work together on a series of projects in Bolivia and on Turtle Island, the Indigenous name for the United States. The intent of the partnership was to establish and strengthen relations of cooperation and interchange directed toward decolonization in

order to achieve *vivir bien*/living well through projects of interest such as education, culture, cosmovision (A Mesoamerican world view), climate change, community health, and well-being of Mother Earth. These goals of the partnership were accomplished through four mutually agreed-upon exchanges over a three-year period. By the end of the three years the Indigenous people of Turtle Island and Bolivia had become more than collaborators. They had become *hunkapi*, or relatives, because of the respect, generosity, cooperation, and support we gave to each other during this partnership that became more ceremony than process. The experience that solidified this relationship was when the Bolivians came to *Wakanj Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park during our spring equinox of 2011, a time of balanced light and dark. During their prayers and offerings, six bald eagles hovered over the delegation, two in mating flight, for 45 minutes. For the Bolivians, it was fulfillment of the prophecy about the meeting of the eagle and the condor, which means that the land would reawaken.

## BEING AT THE TABLE

In 2002, after three years of meetings with city, state, county, federal and tribal stakeholders, the 106 Group, a Minnesota-based cultural resources management and planning company, was able to get *Wakanj Tipi* and the land around the site designated as an EPA toxic waste site, eligible for clean-up funds. In 2005, the 27-acre Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary was opened, the newest colonial name for the home of *Wakanj Tipi* cave (Gould & Rock, 2016, p. 231).

Anne Ketz, archaeologist and CEO of the 106 Group, facilitated the complex relationships between government agencies, tribes, and the public. The 106 Group works with hundreds of communities across the country to rally around their shared past and preserve cultural landscapes as well as stories and structures including all stakeholders. The 106 Group worked diligently to bring Dakota elders into the process, but in the end their voices and stories were of less concern than the settler colonial interpretation of the site, which is now called Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary. Being at

the table, the Indigenous people gained support for the restoration of the land, but not the Dakota interpretation of and relationship to their sacred site.

Waziyatawin (2008) argues that maintaining the hegemony and unequal positionalities hurts not only Dakotas, but all:

Truth-telling has the potential to alleviate the burden that all of us carry - Dakota people carry historical trauma and the pain of ongoing oppression and White Minnesotans carry the burden of maintaining oppressive systems and institutions. The denial of humanity to Minnesota's Original People is a burden carried by all Minnesotans. (Waziyatawin, p.94).

Unlike the partnership with the Bolivians, Indigenous peoples have had to continue to assert their rights as the original peoples of Turtle Island and *Mni Sota Makoche*, often being one or a few among many settlers. Waziyatawin (2008) describes the challenges but also the need to persist:

It is very difficult to stand alone, and we do so when we have to because we cannot imagine doing anything else, but standing alone is wearisome. It is imperative for individuals to speak out in support of our efforts if they are in agreement with the Dakota struggle for justice. Silence suggests complicity with the status quo. To not speak out is to engage in the crime of genocide denial and to perpetuate another crime against humanity. (Waziyatawin, 2008, p.94).

So we continue to show up, speak out, and try to partner, because as the old adage states: "If you're not at the table, you're on the menu." Recently we heard Onandaga Chief Oren Lyons say these words at the 10<sup>th</sup> triennial gathering of the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) in Toronto in June 2017.

In searching for the origins of this statement, we came upon Carol Bush, RN, (2013), who did not coin the phrase but provided an explanation about the importance of being at the table:

To me, the [table-menu] statement means that no matter how much someone agreeing with you might try to represent you, having the unique experience of being you and being where decisions are made means volumes more. All too often, if you're not part of the decision-making, you will likely get left out, or worse yet, get served on the menu. One of the things I learned early in life was getting involved...and yes, more than one of us [family members] have been labeled as a "troublemaker" in our lives. Today the world might use the label, 'disruptive innovator'...I had to secure a place at the table. (Bush, 2013).

Bush's comments are insightful, but if spoken by a globally known Indigenous leader such as Chief Lyons, they carry even more gravitas. He described how First Nations people were seen as rabbits by the colonizers, in the eyes of their law and the Doctrine of Discovery, because we had the right to conditionally live on the land "or under a bush", but not to possess it in any way since we were seen as non-human. The Doctrine of Discovery was an edict ordered by Catholic Pope Nicholas V in 1452, and reaffirmed by Pope Alexander VI in 1493, "specifically sanctioning and promoting the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian nations and their territories" throughout the world (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18). This relationship was not about partnership but once again it was based on dominance.

This is why it remains important to educate stakeholders about working from a true partnership model with an understanding of critical Indigenous pedagogy of place (CIPP), which focuses on the social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of a geographic place to ensure that well-meaning stakeholders capture the deep meaning of place and learn to respect and support both the Indigenous voice and leadership at their perceived table. Trinidad (2016) argues that "CIPP encourages active efforts to preserve, sustain and strengthen place. It purposely clarifies the cultural connections

to place” and “fosters dialog in restoring Indigenous ways of knowing and rediscovering what has been in a place for generations” (p. 5). CIPP, according to Trinidad, is participatory and responsive to community decision making processes (p.12).

Melanie Kleiss challenges partners to consider that human beings are highly social animals and need one another to survive. In this way it makes more sense to assume that other people would like to see us succeed. A definition based on increased support assumes that we are already supporting one another and naturally aligned. (Melanie Kleiss, personal communication, August, 2017).

Through partnership we simply try to do even better. This approach comes from a place of trust and good will. It would reduce misunderstandings and welcome new ideas. Moreover, there is no failure because there is no “agreement” that can crumble and return the partners to a state of competition. Instead, the worst that can happen is that better ways to support one another are not uncovered. In other words, two entities are already supporting each other in the best ways they can at that time. It is a cause for celebration, not failure.

## **POTENTIAL FOR SPIRITUAL HEALING**

After 180 years of being pushed away from their sacred origin sites, there is a very recent possibility that the Dakota Nation may once again have the opportunity to be in ceremony with *Inyan Sha* with the hope of moving it to *Wakan Tipi*. *Inyan Sha* is the last remaining, undynamited sacred origin birthstone from the time of creation. This birthstone is a 2000-pound granite boulder which geologists call a glacial erratic, that rested at a limestone river area perhaps a dozen millennia earlier. Each spring equinox the Dakota marked the new year by painting red stripes on *Inyan Sha* and placing offerings at the rock to give thanks. Since the treaties in 1837 and 1851 and the exile in 1862, the Dakota lost control of *Inyan Sha*. The last Dakota ceremony to take place with *Inyan Sha* was almost a century ago in 1918 with the Lower Sioux, who had to travel 150 miles back to their former homelands to hold the ceremony. The Newport

United Methodist Church, almost eight miles south of *Wakan Tipi*, now keeps *Inyan Sha* “safe” as it was moved beside their church parking lot.

The United Methodist Church would hold gospel tent meetings each year during the 4<sup>th</sup> of July for over a century, during and after the Dakota exile, naming the area the Red Rock camp. A town and eventually a saloon named Red Rock also developed there. The town once called Red Rock was later renamed Newport. Then *Inyan Sha* and the first missionary’s log cabin were again disturbed and moved about 32 miles to the northwest to Medicine Lake in Plymouth, Minnesota for 32 years, before being returned to Newport in 1969. Of course, the Dakota were never consulted in any of this.

Bishop Bruce Ough, presiding church leader for United Methodist Church congregations in Minnesota and North and South Dakota, read a statement on March 16, 2017 at a showing of Sheldon Wolfchild’s 2014 film *Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code*. Wolfchild, a Dakota elder and filmmaker, led the effort to return *Inyan Sha* to the Dakota people. After reading the statement, Bishop Ough declared that he would like *Inyan Sha* returned to the Dakota people as an act of repentance to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. The Lower Sioux Traditional Elders and Medicine Peoples and other Dakotas came to consensus regarding their desire to move *Inyan Sha* to a protected location near the future *Wakan Tipi* Interpretive Center.

Since then the Dakota have waited for Bishop Ough to meet with the local congregation and educate the greater church about this vision. As of early September 2017, the Bishop indicated that perhaps yet another year would be needed to educate his congregations. If true partnership was indeed occurring, there wouldn’t be a question in the mind of the church, nor the city of Newport, about who should determine the residing place of *Inyan Sha*. Once again the patriarchy of the church and the state has determined what is in the best interest of Indigenous peoples. The stalling and “mediation” tactics have further eroded the consensus of the Dakota people as a tool of dividing and conquering.

## CONCLUSION

After some gains along the healing path with projects such as the 106 Group and the Lower Phalen Creek Project, there are many public and private entities that continue to make it challenging for the Dakota relationship to *Wakan Tipi* and Indian Mounds Park to be fully recognized. It is our conclusion that we still have far to journey before the Dakota story and homecoming on their own terms, on their own sacred ancestral lands of their cosmic birth and burial can occur, without the watchful eyes of the newcomer, gatekeeping settlers.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

*Bdote* - Where rivers join

*Chacha-warmi* An Andean cosmovision concept based in complementarity and duality. An essential Indigenous concept for decolonization and depatriarchalization in the Bolivian 2009 Constitution.

*Huŋkakan* - 1. Ancestral origin stories, 2. Ancestors

*Huŋkapi* - Relatives

*Inyan* Rock - First stuff of the universe

*Inyan Sha* - Red Rock, an ancient granite boulder south of *Wakan Tipi* where offerings and prayers were left.

*Kichiyuzapi Wakan* - wedding, marriage

*Koda* - friend or ally

*Makoche Chokaya Kin* - Dakota Origin Center of the Universe

*Mitakuyapi* - My relatives

*Mihunkake, Mihunkakan* - My ancestors

*Mni* - Water

*Mni Sota Makoche* - Land where water reflects sky

*Ocheti Shakowiŋ Oyate* - Seven Star-Fire Nations: 4 Dakota, 2 Nakota & 1 Lakota

*Okodakichiyapi* - Alliance, society, or partnership

*Tiwahe* - Family

*Tiyoshpaye* - Extended family

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Jim Rock (Dakota) has taught astronomy, chemistry, and physics for over 30 years in urban, suburban, and reservation schools and universities. He presently serves as Program Director of the Marshall Alworth Planetarium at the University of Minnesota Duluth where his goal is to “indigenize and digitize the skies” by teaching Native Skywatchers and Indigenous Science courses for the Department of Physics and Astronomy and American Indian Studies. He co-authored the D(L)akota Star Map Constellation Guide and was the principal investigator and designed the first Native American experiment aboard NASA's last space shuttle, STS-135 Atlantis mission, in 2011. Jim has also done extensive work on the restoration and preservation of Dakota sacred sites.

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