

Teachings of the Buffalo Hunt

Tatanka Wanasapi Ta Wounspe

A Sacred Time for a Young Man

Oitancan Mani Zephier

I am Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota, and so are my children. We are Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota first before we are American. We are the first people of this land. In fact, it is our land. When you have destroyed it and killed it, we will be here to see it replenish itself.

Boys, Men, and Warriors

Before Europeans came to North America, we practiced our old customs. We raised boys to be good people, having balanced emotions and energies, including that of the man and the woman. The women of our people raised boys until they were about 7 or 8 years old. From their mothers, boys learned compassion, love, and affection. Then the boys went to their dads and uncles where they learned things such as hunting, patience, serving the people, and placing the people first.

These teachings are the foundation of being a warrior. This was the dream of all young boys. They wanted to be like their dads and uncles. They wanted to be warriors. It was the warrior's job to take fear away from the village by protect-



The ceremony before the buffalo hunt.



On the Trail, Buffalo Hunt, circa 1910. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

ing it. The warrior societies would send out scouts to look for the enemy. Knowing the scouts were watching for the enemy, the people could sleep and live peacefully until the enemy approached.

Usually, an elder male would choose a young boy for grooming into a warrior society. The elder male would look for a young boy who showed initiative and put forth effort to learn and achieve more in life. If the boy was lazy and didn't care about his status in the society, then he would not make a successful warrior. He would easily give up when things became difficult. No one wanted someone like this in their warrior society.

Buffalo are our relatives. They are us. We are them. We have the same spirits. We are the Pte Oyate, the Buffalo People.

The buffalo hunt was dangerous. The warrior would choose the fastest and longest winded horse to be able to run with the buffalo. The buffalo could easily take a horse off

its feet. It was the men's duty to give boys knowledge on how to avoid being hurt. This is how it was done long ago.

Today's Buffalo Hunt

Today, things are a bit different. Today, the buffalo are mostly in a large pasture. Sometimes there is enough room for them to run and hide in ravines, and sometimes there is not. Today, we use trucks. The ranch owners are hesitant to let us use horses because of liability. It's dangerous.

We also use rifles. The kill shot is behind the ear or in the forehead. Heart shots will leave the buffalo wounded to run from you for another hour. I have seen a buffalo run wounded for a long time. Hit it behind the ear or in the forehead, and it will drop immediately.

Lessons from the Hunt

I have been on several hunts with my sons and my nephews. Each one is different, but in each one, we learn important lessons.

For example, through the buffalo we can learn compassion. The buffalo choose which one of the herd members will die. When it is time, this



Young men in front of the teepee they have set up for the week of the buffalo hunt.

buffalo will walk away from the herd as if to give itself to you. I have seen this several times. When the buffalo is killed and falls to the ground, the remaining buffalo in the herd will approach the wounded relative to say their goodbyes. I have seen buffalo try to stand the wounded one back up. I have also seen them "sandwich" the wounded buffalo and try to keep it standing. They are very intelligent and strong animals.

When you shoot a buffalo, you should let it die naturally. Do not put any more bullets in it.





The author's son, Wacinksbaya Ounye Zephier, at the buffalo hunt.

It needs time to say its prayers and good-byes. You disrespect it when you put multiple bullets into it after it is down on the ground.

We also learn about the gifts that the buffalo offers us. When a young male gets his first kill, he will drink the blood and eat a piece of the heart. The blood is medicine. The blood tastes salty and thick. It's really not

that bad. When the buffalo graze and eat off the land, they choose the medicines from the land. That medicine becomes a part of them, so their blood becomes medicine.

One time during a school hunt, I had the majority of a high school football team drink the blood of the buffalo one day prior to their next game. The next day they won 50 to 0, and the game was over at half time due to the mercy rule. I attribute that effort and energy to the medicine they drank the day before.

This is certainly not all there is to know about the buffalo hunt, but you will learn more as you endure the hunt. We never use the buffalo as a commodity to profit from. Buffalo are our relatives. They are us. We are them. We have the same spirits. We are the *Pte Oyate*, the Buffalo People.

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After the hunt: processing the meat and the skin of the buffalo.

Write About It

Share stories about traditions and ceremonies that you have for your sons and daughters, or that your elders had for you.

First write a narrative about the tradition. Tell the story of what happened.

Then write an expository essay about the role of traditional practices and ceremonies in society. Why do they matter? Draw from your own experience and other sources, including this essay by Oitancan Mani Zephier and others in the magazine (eg., pp. 10-11 and 12).