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**Introduction to Lakota Traditions**

Lakota, meaning “friends” or “allies,” are an American Indian people from the Great Plains region of North America. They are also called “Sioux,” though this a pejorative name coined by the Algonquin that means “snakes in the grass.” A nomadic group of hunters and gatherers, the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota together make up the political body known as *Titonwa.* The Lakota live a life governed by nature and the movement of the universe, emphasizing virtues such as bravery, wisdom, fortitude, and generosity in their everyday lives.

The Lakota believe in various spirits, connecting with the spirit world through the Seven Sacred Rites and Ceremonies. Acting as a bridge between the natural and spiritual world are the *Wicasa Wakan* (Holy Men).

Central to the Lakota way of life are the [Seven Sacred Rites and Ceremonies](http://1onewolf.com/lakota/spirit7.htm), which were given to them the White Buffalo Calf Woman. They include *Wanagi Wicagluha* (keeping the soul sacred), *Inikaagapi* or *Inipi* (visiting “sweat lodges”), *Hanbleceya* (crying for a vision), *Wiwanyang Wacipi* (the Sun Dance), *Hunkapi* (the making of relatives), *Isnati Awicalowanpi* (a coming-of-age ceremony for young women), and *Tapa Wankaye* (the throwing of the ball). All of these rites and ceremonies are organized around the sun and stars. They are ritualistic and spiritual, including active, physical participation.

It is important to note that Lakota experiences of the spiritual world are personal and individualistic—everyone has a different experience depending on personal insight and need. And the goal of these rites and ceremonies is to help the Lakota people connect to and experience the spiritual world during different times of their lives.

All of these rites include [vision seeking,](http://www.crystalinks.com/visionquest.html) an attempt for the Lakota to connect with and understand the spiritual world and their relationship within it. They also include a pipe, [*Cannupa Wakan*](http://mreid.com/lakota/ritcalf.htm)**,** which stands at the center of the Lakota religion and is used throughout the rituals. The pipe is smoked during these sacred rites, thereby reconnecting the Lakota to the spirit world and, more particularly, the White Buffalo Calf Woman. By smoking the pipe, the Lakota will once more become one with nature and the universe.

It must be emphasized that the Lakota do not separate religion from life. The two coexist as one. A modern Western definition of religion (that makes religion a matter of belief or separates church from state) would not be appropriate to the Lakota, as they see their beliefs and ceremonies as part of their traditional culture. The Lakota view their traditions as a spiritual system that is incorporated into their daily life and respects and revolves around all aspects of the universe.

**Works Consulted**

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