Sacred Architecture of the Plains Indian as a Persuasive Ethos: The Persistence of an Environmental Meta-ethic

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Abstract

This paper supports the idea that Plains Indian architecture, namely the tipi, and the language inherent to it has the capacity to interweave all aspects of human life with the natural environs. This polysynthetic concentration of principles has a distinct influence on a traditional peoples life way and their sense of an environmental meta-ethic. By architecturally fixing a sacred center in one’s life and by fixing one’s home firmly within the living world, one gives rise to an ecological understanding of self in relation to all things. The Research Question being tested here is that once people are given to an understanding of the complexity and meaningfulness of these traditions, they will be influenced by the profound sense of environmental relationship. In other words, historic and contemporary Plains Indian traditions have values that are relevant to today’s society.

The word tipi, for the Lakota, means to dwell within. Tipi, or the English version teepee, is from the Siouan dialect and gives reference to a conical housing style typical of most indigenous plains peoples. The use of this traditional housing style can be traced to early circumpolar peoples. The tipi has since become a standard visual image in relation to Indian peoples. Laubin and Laubin (1957) in their seminal work The Indian Tipi explain that, 

No dwelling in the entire world stirs the imagination like the tipi of the Plains Indian. It is without doubt one of the most picturesque of all shelters and one of the most practical movable dwellings ever invented. Comfortably roomy, and well ventilated, it was ideal for the roving life these people led in following buffalo herds up and down the country. It also proves to be just as ideal in a more permanent camp during the long winters on the prairies. (p. 19)

The three primary characteristics of pastoralists or nomadic architecture according to Libhart and Ellison (1973) are: 1) ease of transport, 2) durability, and 3) lightness of weight. The Plains Indian tipi, as shelter, is indeed extremely functional. It is warm in the winter, cool in the summer, designed to turn wind and rain while remaining simple to erect, dismantle, and transport. It should be noted that today there is an increasing use of tipis across the Northern plains which is indicative of an increasing pride and interest in Indian identification. As a traditional architecture form, the tipi symbolizes for people an increasing awareness of self, the relation of self to nature and the sense of self against mass culture. (p. 7-15)
Upon arriving at camp and setting up the tipi, a traditional Indian person is engaging in one of many acts in daily life that serve to, once again, recreate the world. It is understood by all traditional peoples according to Brown (1977) that “. . . creation is an eternal process of the here and now.” (p. 6) A person who lives in this tradition or is exposed to this traditional way of seeing “. . . comes to learn in integral manner something of who [they are] in the fullness of [their] human person” (p. 6) and thus how they stand in relation to all elements of creation. This is ontology of process.

It is because of this ontology and a language of process and presence that the tipi is considered to be sacred architecture (Brown, 1985, 1986, 1987; Nabokov, 1985, 1986). The tipi is an active orientation to the world, a microcosm of the greater macrocosm. Its cosmography explains how the tipi acts as a sanctum and axis mundi for the people. It is an example of how a people tie themselves firmly to the universe they inhabit, acting to participate fully with the world in a morally responsible fashion.

Despite the numerous interpretations across the Northern plains of tipi cosmographic symbolism, there is an overwhelming and persuasive metaphysic of relationship. This relationship is explained through all elements of the tipi.

The Cheyenne tipi, for example, as explained by Whiteman (1985) has a three-pole support structure. By including the lift pole as the fourth pole, reference is given to the four cardinal directions of space and the Cheyenne enclose within the tipi a model of their world. It is an inner space representational of outer living.

The east pole is associated with childhood, the south pole with adolescence, the lift pole or west pole to which the cover is tied is associated with adulthood, and finally the north pole is associated with old age. Just as these poles all come together and intertwine, being able then to stand together, so is everything in the world interrelated and able to stand in its own presence firmly on the ground. This complexity of relationship is well illustrated by Powers (1986) who describes the use of sacred numbers by the Lakota. He comments that the four directions are referenced not only by age but by 1) color, 2) season, 3) animal, and 4) bird. When one speaks to one direction as in a prayer, the power of the totality is also called upon.

Where the poles are tied together is also the same place that earth meets sky cosmographically. The central cooking fire in microcosm is the macrocosmic sun. The smoke plume is representational of the passing of life from childhood to old age, another symbolic element of our journey through life’s relationships. The cooking fire acts as the fixed center for the almost circular tipi, a center which becomes the axis mundi or the fifth and sixth direction of space, the zenith and nadir. The interrelationships present within the circle and its components are again supportive of a manner of being in the world that is mindful of nature’s dynamic processes. The circular tipi, like the circular world has its center fixed in ecological hierophany, this means that, there present within the tipi is total...
possibility. On comparing architecture with cosmology, Eliade (1978) notes, “The cosmogonic significance on the Center is that all creation, be it a cosmogony or an anthropogony, takes place or begins in a center.” (p. 141-156)

Due to this importance of a fixed center, traditional tipi dwellers associate the central cooking fire with that most ultimate principle. For the Lakota this is Wakan Tanka or in English “Great Mysterious.” That this term translates as two adjectives and not a noun emphasizes an ever present and ongoing relational present. In this way one cannot expect the teleological conclusions of Aristotle as quoted in Reese (1980), “being is and non-being is not” (p. 52), rather there is an emphasis on relational participation. The cooking fire is Wankan Tanka and that most ultimate principle is also the central cooking fire.

The inherent power of words, this sacredness of language is explained by Brown (1985, 1986, 1987). When a Lakota says the word for spotted eagle, it is believed that the power and somewhat of the essence of the bird is contained in the word. Lakota artist and author, Amiotte (1983), explains that words are instruments “. . . through which the power of the sacred will be funneled into this, the temporal world, as recreativeness through the breath . . .” (p.2). So that even speaking about matters concerning architecture is a process rich with relational material. This polysynthetic reinforcement of relationship helps a traditional person to become a part of their total surrounding, as becoming a human being aware of their place within the world.

A picture of traditional life ways begins to reveal ways in which the everyday activities have a myriad of meanings. All levels of meaning serve to remind people of their relational place in the world. By acknowledging components of natural ecosystems, i.e., rocks, birds, animals and plants, and indeed whole ecosystems themselves as relation, Vest (186) declares that these people “. . . demonstrate an all inclusive moral system that therefore sponsors environmental ethics” (p.1). That this ethic is a result of a polysynthetic valuing is a meta-ethic, one that extends participatory moral considerability to cosmic totality. For just as the smoke rises from the fire and the four cardinal directions tell us of our life’s journey, the extra long Crow lodge poles act to funnel power for living down into the people’s lives from the universe beyond.

Another aspect of Plains Indian architecture that serves to highlight an environmental meta-ethic is the practice of painting tipis with sacred and vision images. Perhaps the most famous design as researched by Brasser (1977, 1979) is the Blackfoot Hugging Bear design. This motif depicts a large bear completely encircling the tipi. As Brown (1985, 1986, 1987) recounts, to enter such a tipi is to actually enter the sacred world and body of the bear. Once in the tipi, the person is inside the bear and is acting reciprocally with the bear. This sense of becoming acts to reinforce process ontology for it is not uncommon today for people to still believe in the metamorphosis of humans into animals and animals then into humans. Therefore all things are living and are addressed as “persons” or “beings.”
Eliade (1978) speaks to this ethical participation with the world

do to inhabit a territory, that is to say to take up one’s abode, to build a home, always implies a vital decision which engages the existence of the entire community. To be ‘situated’ in a landscape, to organize it, to inhabit it, are actions which presuppose an existential choice: the choice of the ‘universe’ that one is prepared to assume be ‘creating it.’ (p. 151-156)

The recognition of obligatory reciprocal participation within the universe by Plains Indians is permeated throughout their culture. It is especially evident today in the increasing use of tipis and the return by many youths to traditional ceremonies. The architecture and its inherent language are visible signs of an underlying and ubiquitous environmental meta-ethic which recognizes the relational responsibility to the immediate ecologic hierophany and the cosmic totality.

To live within or to be exposed to a sacred life way such as traditional Plains Indian tipi living allows one today to juxtapose the values of two very different cultures. The traditional values which survive today are an important measure on how far we moderns have come from our Indo-European roots. There is still a power present in the world possessed by Indigenous peoples that perhaps we can learn from. Their architecture and language of forms can provide for us insights into a metaphysic of nature which will provide meaningful relation to universal ecological parameters. We will hopefully see, after comparison, that the Plains Indian tipi is a home, a universe in fact, that is actually tied to the ground, while modern homes can generally make no such claim. There is, I believe, an infusion of underlying ideas, a persuasive ethos, in this traditional culture which promotes an environmental meta-ethic necessary for ecologic and cultural survival as well as for a meaningful human existence within the universe.