WAKAN TIPI AND
INDIAN MOUNDS PARK

Reclaiming an Indigenous feminine sacred site

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Abstract

The colonization of Turtle Island (North America) resulted in genocide and attempts to erase the Indigenous and feminine cosmologies that permeated Indigenous lands, particularly Indigenous centers of power. This article uses a case study approach to critically examine the history, cosmology, destruction and restoration of an Indigenous sacred site located near present-day St. Paul, Minnesota, known to the Dakota peoples as Wakaŋ Tipi or Wakaŋyaŋ Tipi, names once incompletely translated as “sacred dwelling place” or “they live sacredly.” Wakaŋ Tipi, with its feminine birth mounds and unique ecology, is the place that connects earth and sky. The site has drawn Indigenous peoples from all over the world to learn from its teachings. The article includes discussion on the collaboration that has restored this sacred place from a toxic waste dump to a site where ceremony and learning can take place once again.

Keywords

Dakota, sacred sites, decolonization, petroglyphs, burial mounds

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Introduction

Wakaŋ Tipi is a Dakota sacred site at the base of limestone bluffs and sandstone cliffs that overlook the Mississippi River as it flows through St. Paul, Minnesota. Resting above Wakaŋ Tipi cave is an Indian burial ground combined with a series of mounds now only superficially known as Indian Mounds Park.

Although Wakaŋ Tipi and Indian Mounds Park are listed today among the park services as separate significant historical sites, Dakota cosmology envisions them as one sacred site. Brady (1999) describes sacred sites such as Wakaŋ Tipi as “conduits through which Native Americans are able to channel the physical and spiritual manifestations of their beliefs” (p. 156). Cajete (2001) adds that these sites are places Indians talk about and that these “places were created for us as a result of co-creation over long periods of time” (p. 98). Wakaŋ Tipi and Indian Mounds Park are places the Dakota peoples have always talked about but have lost some memory of because of the genocide and sudden expulsion following the Dakota War of 1862. This article describes the journey to reclaim Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park as a sacred site by reengaging the memory of the Dakota relationship to this place.

Pre-colonial cosmology, history and sociolinguistics

Mni Sota Makoče/Minnesota is the Dakota peoples’ homeland that rests along and extends east and west from the Ḥahä Wakpa/Mississippi River. Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park is considered one of the most significant historical and sacred sites of the Dakota peoples. It is situated upstream from the site of the first historic Kapoža village, home of the Little Crow dynasty of the Bdewakaŋtoŋwaŋ band of Dakota until 1837.

Wakaŋ Tipi or Wakaŋyaŋ Tipi is a large cave with a spring-fed lake that flows from its mouth. Its Dakota name is incompletely translated today as “sacred dwelling place.” A better explanation is given by Lakota professor Albert White Hat (2012) in his book Life’s Journey—Zuya: Oral Teachings from Rosebud. For White Hat, rather than the sacred, holy or mysterious, wakaŋ actually refers to the ability or power to create or destroy, which reminds us of our responsibility to see both forces at work in something considered wakaŋ. Tipi is both a noun meaning “dwelling place” and a verb form meaning “they live.” Wakaŋyaŋ is an adverb meaning “creatively” or “destructively” that modifies “they live”—so that Wakaŋyaŋ Tipi is more accurately translated as “they [who] live in the way of creation and/or destruction.” We believe this refers to the Wakiŋyaŋ or Kiŋyaŋ Wakaŋ, who are the winged Thunderbirds in Dakota cosmology able to create or destroy with a lightning flash from their single eye. The Dakota peoples considered Wakaŋ Tipi to be a place of both destructive and creative power.

In order to fully understand the cosmology of this site, it is also important to examine the mounds above Wakaŋ Tipi cave. According to Nelson (2008), the mounds were built one by one between 200 BC and 400 AD, leading down the bluff slope from Indian Mounds Park to Wakaŋ Tipi. Archaeologists often refer to those responsible for the mound building as “Hopewell Indians,” not Dakota peoples, but Nelson (2008) asserts that the only truth known about the Hopewell is that they were Native peoples. We know “Hopewell” was not the name that the mound-building people called themselves but there is no evidence, according to Nelson, of what they were called (pp. 2–3). We disagree with Nelson, believing there is sufficient evidence passed down through oral tradition to the living Dakota elders which affirms their ancestors were the mound builders and caretakers of Wakaŋ Tipi and Indian Mounds Park. Birmingham and Eisenberg (2000) support this argument and cite a source from 1896 in which the Ojibwe credit...
the Dakota for the mounds built in northwestern Wisconsin. Although the Dakota no longer live in Wisconsin or the Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park region, this entire area was once part of their original homeland dating back 12,000 years or more.

Further research at this site has established that the earthworks constructed at Indian Mounds Park were not settlements but rather places of ceremony. Nelson (2008) credits Edward D. Neil and D. A. Robertson for the excavation or legal looting of the remaining mounds on behalf of the Minnesota Historical Society beginning in the 1850s, but it was T. H. Lewis (1898) who contributed much of what is known about the exhumed mounds. At least 19 burial mounds originally existed on the bluff above Wakaŋ Tipi and 18 more were located less than a mile away along the southeastern bluff. Findings from the mounds included human bones accompanied by grave offerings such as shells, perforated bear teeth, copper ornaments and projectile points, although most of these were destroyed in a fire at the Minnesota Capital Building in 1881 (Nelson, 2008). The National Park Service (2014) suggests the Dakota peoples may have used mounds constructed by earlier inhabitants to bury their dead or constructed their own mounds on the same site, but we argue the Dakota peoples would not have buried their dead in the graves of other unrelated peoples as archaeologists suggest. Although the Dakota eventually discontinued the construction of mounds, they did continue to wrap the bones of their deceased in buffalo skins, placing valuable objects with them upon burial, just like the mound builders of the past.

The first white man to enter Wakaŋ Tipi according to Westerman and White (2012) was Jonathan Carver, in November 1766. He stated in his journals that the Dakotas always buried the bones of their dead in Wakaŋ Tipi cave below the mounds. We suspect this may have been a later tradition, after mound building was no longer practiced. Carver’s journals also note that Wakaŋ Tipi was a place of ceremony where leaders met to hold council in the summers, indicating its continued use by the Dakota as a significant site to seek spiritual and political guidance (pp. 75–76).

**Feminine cosmology**

The Dakota spiritual traditions have strong feminine roots reflected in their cosmology and spiritual practices. In approximately 1200 AD, the Dakotas adopted the teachings of White Buffalo Calf Woman who brought them the čanguŋ (sacred pipe) and seven sacred ceremonies, which are still practiced today. Much less is known about Dakota beliefs before 1200 AD, which leaves many questions about the principles and practices that guided them before that time. We believe many answers to early Dakota cosmology lie in Wakaŋ Tipi and Indian Mounds Park.

The Dakota, like many Indigenous peoples, know our earth home to be a loving female being who has nurtured life continuously and inexhaustibly since creation. For the Dakotas she is Maka Ina (Earth Mother), with all life coming from her (Maynard, 2014, p. 79). The area now known as Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park is the embodiment of Maka Ina for Dakota peoples. Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park was not just a place of death as the archaeologists claim; it was—and is—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. In fact, to the Dakotas, Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park is the embodiment of Maka Ina. So they created a pregnant belly-like mound up on the bluff and saw themselves as being birthed from the womb-like cave of Wakaŋ Tipi at the base of the bluff, with the flowing birth water emerging onto Maka Ina.

Dakota midwife Autumn Cavendar-Wilson has described the feminine cosmology of Wakaŋ Tipi:
Wakaŋ Tipi is a place that is both literally and metaphorically a “womb of the earth,” a place where the boundary between this world and the other is permeable. With death being more or less a reversal of birth, prepared bodies of the deceased were brought to this womb so that their souls could more easily transverse the spiritual space between here and the Wanaŋ Tačaŋku [road of the spirits, identified with the Milky Way]. Dakota philosophy understands the hereafter and the here before to be one and the same, the home of both our ancestors and our descendants. The female body, and by extension women’s ceremonies, were held in the highest esteem, thought to be one of the primary seats of spiritual power on this plane. (personal communication, 2015)

The Dakota peoples rekindle the relationship with their stellar home every time a Dakota child is born and a laboring mother appeals to T(u/o)ŋwĩ (Blue Star Woman), an auntie midwife who resides in the Big Dipper, to facilitate the birth process. After the baby is born, the cord is cut and the placenta is discharged and an umbilical cord ceremony takes place. The birthing process is complete when the dried cord of the baby falls off and is placed in a leather-beaded turtle or lizard umbilical pouch that mirrors the turtle and salamander constellations the Dakotas saw in the night sky above. The pouch traditionally was to be kept by the individual throughout their life to remind them of their connection to their mother/Mother and their homeland.

Since the Dakotas believe they descend from the stellar bison nation through the terrestrial birth water, consider this trio of Dakota terms: mni-tnami-Tayamni. Mni is water; tamni is the amniotic birth water, placenta or afterbirth; and Tayamni is the name given to the bison constellation emerging from a womb-like circle of stars known in Western astronomy as Gemini, Canis Major, Orion and Taurus. Beneath Tayamni is the Dakota snake constellation, similar to the four snakes drawn ascending on the Wakaŋ Tipi cave ceiling, which features buffalo drawings as well (see Figure 1). So it would seem that the womb/cave dome ceiling is a representation of the night sky and its constellations.

Furthermore, the rope that binds the tipi poles of the Dakota lodge is used by the laboring mother as she squats during the birthing process. This could also be a representation of the cosmic serpent umbilicus linking the stellar home with the cekpa (navel or center) of Maka Ina below. This region includes not only Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park but also Bdote, which translates as the joining of two rivers, in this case the Haha Wakpa/Mississippi River and the Wakpa Mni Sota/Minnesota River. Bdote is called Maka Čokaya Kį, or the center of the earth.

After many years of talking to elders and assembling pieces of information, we now believe the petroglyphs inside of Wakaŋ Tipi cave are representations of the constellations the Dakotas saw in the night sky, revealing their deep sky-earth relationship in the form of a mirroring, or kapemni (Lee, Rock, & O’Rourke, 2014). Rock calls this earth-sky mirroring construction principle starchitecture. Lakota ceremonial leader Elmer Running explains that the first three tipi poles that are raised for every Dakota lodge represent the three stars in Orion, which are the backbone of the Tayamni buffalo constellation (see Goodman, 1992, pp. 16–18). Rock believes the Wakaŋ Tipi cave mirrors a particular star in Tayamni and that they are symbolically connected by one of the first three tipi poles.

Kapemni, or the mirroring of the earth and sky, can be thought of as meaning “As it is above; it is below.” This mirroring can be visualized using two tipis stacked vertically, with the top tipi inverted. The top tipi represents the sky above, the stars or the spirit world, and the bottom tipi represents the earth, the material or the physical world (see Figure 2).

Dakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel Wildcat (2001) discuss the kind of mirroring power of sky and earth possessed by certain places such as Wakaŋ Tipi:
The personal nature of the universe demands that each and every entity in it seek and sustain personal relationships . . . Hardly a tribe exists that did not construct its dwellings after some particular model of the universe. The principle involved was that whatever is above must be reflected below [and vice versa; the kapemni principle]. This principle enabled the people to correlate their actions with the larger movements of the universe. Wherever possible the larger cosmos was represented and reproduced to provide a context in which ceremonies could occur . . . Star knowledge was among the most secretive and sophisticated of all the information that the Indians possessed. (pp. 23–26)

The petroglyphs on the ceiling of Wakaŋ Tipi cave are more than representations of constellations; we believe they could very well be important guides to Dakota origin stories, language(s) and journeys. These constellations include buffalo petroglyphs, some with an oval drawn within the outline, perhaps indicating pregnancy or the womb. This circle of stars is the stellar womb of the Dakota buffalo constellation that emerged as a celestial fetus from the womb. The three backbone stars of the buffalo constellation are also known as Orion’s Belt in Western astronomy. In a 1986 conversation with Dakota elder Gary Cavender, Rock was told: “We come from a star, or a cave, or we’ve always been here . . . a star in Orion’s belt” (personal communication, 1986). These three concepts as stated by Gary Cavender lean together axiomatically, much like the first three poles placed as the foundation of the tipi. We call these three principles starchitecture. This is the foundation of Dakota cosmology, which can be expressed in English as: “We come from a star and to the stars we will return; and we come from the earth and to the earth we will return, forever relatives of Father Sky and Mother Earth.”

Humans have always been preoccupied with the mysteries of birth, sex, fertility and death, and Slifer (2000) describes serpent petroglyphs, similar to those found at Wakaŋ Tipi, as symbols of fertility, abundance and creation that were imbued with spiritual potency. Symbols of rain and moisture and lightning and snakes would ensure a fruitful earth along with supernatural beings that empower and control life forms. Origin myths and caves involve fertility since the caves of Maka Ina are her womb in which dwell ancestral spirits. Slifer adds that caves or fissures were seen as both wombs and tombs and were used for birth and burial rituals.

Cavendar-Wilson (personal communication, 2015) explained that Wakaŋ Tipi cave was the home of the Dakota horned serpent called Uŋktehi, the water protector and eternal foe of Wakiŋyaŋ, the Thunderbird. In Wakaŋ Tipi’s ceiling were carved ascending rattlesnakes documented by Lewis (1898; see Figure 1). Four snakes were carved on the ceiling, two
on each side of the entrance, perhaps oriented to represent the four directions or Wakinyan’s lightning. Understanding the four snakes as lightning and Unktehi/Wakinyan pairs also correlates with the Ho-Chunk creation story (see below), since the snakes in the cave are arched up and over the lake surface beneath them. The 800-year-old pottery shown in Figure 3 was found in Dakota territory at a place now known as the Bryan site in Goodhue County, Minnesota, near Red Wing. It shows the watery sky-earth relationship of the lightning-rain-Wakinyan-snake-Unktehi fertility constellation.

Samuel Blowsnake of the Ho-Chunk Snake Clan recounted his people’s creation story to Smith (1997), in which the number four is also prominent:

Then he [the Earthmaker] made the four directions (cardinal points) and the four winds. On the four corners of the earth he placed them as great and powerful people, to act as island weights. Yet the earth was not quiet. Then he made four large beings and threw them down toward the earth, and they pierced through the earth with their heads eastward. They were snakes. Then the earth became very still and quiet . . . [Then he created a being] in his own likeness [and] Earthmaker felt quite proud of him, so he made three more just like him . . . These first four he made chiefs of the Thunderbirds. (pp. 212–215)

The Ho-Chunks, who say they are the elder relatives of the Dakota, are also Siouxi speakers and their word for snake (wuhKUH) is linguistically similar to the Dakota word wakan. The connections between creation and destruction and between wakan and wuhKUH are reinforced when it is realized that the rattlesnake is connected to pregnancy and abortion medicine. Radin (1973) writes, “The rattlesnake is used in a mixture given to women when in labor . . . she can be made to deliver the embryo if she uses the medicine” (p. 214). In addition, Slifer’s (2000) research on snake and umbilical cord petroglyphs found both horned serpents, like Unktehi, and serpents without horns to be associated with the umbilical cord and birth.

The symmetry of a Dakota star quilt also shows a kapemni design. At birth, death, weddings and honoring ceremonies, Dakotas are wrapped in a star quilt just as Wanağı Taçaŋku wraps and encircles us above. The eight-pointed star design on Native star quilts represents the eight-year journey of the planet Venus. After completing a series of different dance cycles, each nine months long, the movement of Venus creates an eight-pointed star path. Because of this nine-month cycle Venus has long been associated with human gestation. The Dakota have witnessed Venus carrying out this nine-month cycle over the birth-belly mounds and womb caves of Wakan Tipi for thousands of years. Female births are associated with the turtle constellation and its qualities and male births with the salamander/lizard constellation and its qualities.

According to Patricia Albers and Dakota scholar Bea Medicine (1983), Venus, the morning star, has always been an important symbol in Dakota cosmology and ceremony:

It represents the direction from which spirits of the dead travel to earth, and by extension, it symbolizes the link between the living and the dead. Star quilts created by Dakota women are also used as an important conduit for spirits to aid in the yuwipi ceremony as
well as assisting the recently deceased along the Wanaġi Taconditional of the spirits. The diamond-shape pieces of fabric used to create the star design in the quilt also simultaneously are a female symbol of fertility, the turtle. (pp. 129–130)

The turtle is a female constellation also known in Western astronomy as the Giant Square of Pegasus, while the salamander/lizard is a male constellation known in Western astronomy as Cygnus, the Swan, who swims along the Milky Way river beside the Thunderbird (Draco, the Dragon, in Western astronomy). Draco corresponds closely with the Dakota Thunderbird constellation. The third star from the end of the tail of the dragon is Thuban (“snake” in Arabic), which was the North Star 5,000 years ago. It was the starry tip of the Thunderbird’s extended wing (see Figure 3). Also in the Indigenous traditions of Mexico, Venus was associated with a flying, blue-green-feathered snake named Kukulkan or Quetzalcoatl (Staller & Stross, 2013).

Destruction and revitalization

Mnisota Makoče is and always has been the homeland of the Dakota peoples. Like all Indigenous peoples the Dakota relationship to place is core to their existence. In fact, Deloria and Wildcat (2001) state that the word “indigenous means to be of a place” (p. 31) Cajete (2001) adds that Indigenous peoples oriented themselves not only physically in relationship to their homelands but spiritually as well: “They honored their place and considered that they were situated in the center of a sacred place” (pp. 624–625).

With the colonization of the Americas came genocide and countless attempts to erase Indigenous and feminine relationships to Indigenous homelands, particularly Indigenous centers of power. Although the Dakota abandoned the practice of mound building and mound burials prior to colonization, they did not abandon their homeland or sacred origin sites. The Dakota lost control of Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park with the Treaty of 1837. Until that time humans did not live on this deeply sacred place but only came to the site for ceremony and learning. Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park was treated with the greatest respect and reverence by Mnisota Makoče’s first peoples.

However, this changed once settlers such as J. J. Hill and Jacob Schmidt set their sights on Wakaŋ Tipi to advance their capitalist enterprises. In the early 1880s the desecration of this sacred Dakota place began when Hill blew up over 75 feet of the entrance chamber of Wakaŋ Tipi with dynamite, destroying the petroglyphs to make way for his railroad. Soon after, Schmidt’s brewery began using water from the caves, considered the amniotic fluid from Maka Ina’s womb, to make beer which was stored on the site. From that time forward Wakaŋ Tipi became a desecrated dumping ground for railroad rubbish, toxic waste and used household goods. Thirty-one of the 37 mounds were bulldozed in the name of development for a better view; the oak savannah was destroyed and the wetlands were drained and poisoned. Wakaŋ Tipi became a place for throwaway things and throwaway people who were no longer welcome in society.

Mies and Shiva (1993) describe colonization of Indigenous peoples’ homelands as “the forced subjugation of nature and of Earth which is a repository of all forms, latencies and powers of creation” and argue that the economic model shaped by “capitalist patriarchy is based on the commodification of everything” (p. xvi). Similarly, Winona LaDuke, quoting Steve Newcomb in the Native Peoples, Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop II Final Report, states that “the root colon in colonization means to digest” (in Maynard, 2014, p. 8). So colonization can be seen as the digestion of one culture by another, suggesting the colonization of the Americas produced a severely
inflamed colon with an obstruction that never passed through.

Between 1679 and 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 (Waziyatawin, 2008). After fierce fighting, the Dakota men were captured, rounded up and convicted in five-minute so-called trials. These resulted in the hanging of 38 Dakotas—the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. The remaining men were sent to a prison camp in Iowa while the women, children and elders were force-marched 150 miles to a prison camp at Fort Snelling, which was built as an institution of domination on another significant site sacred to the Dakota, Bdote. Without the protection of their men, many of the women were raped, impregnated and murdered by US soldiers. Minnesota governor Alexander Ramsey ordered any remaining Dakota to be exiled from the state. To ensure that they would never return, Ramsey posted a bounty of up to $200 on the scalps of all Dakotas (Waziyatawin, 2008, pp. 17–62).

Although it has been challenged, a Minnesota law still remains on the books making it illegal for any Dakota to live in their homeland. Today only one-tenth of the Dakota peoples live in their homeland of Mnisota Makoce. This racist ideology persists, according to Smith (1997), because it is part of the continuing legacy of violence against Native peoples that has rendered them inherently impure, dirty and ethnically cleansable or removable in the US psyche. Cavendar-Wilson has described the devastating impact that the destruction of Wakan Tipi cave and removal from their homeland has had on the Dakota Oyate:

The contemporary inability of children to attend traditional ceremonies and teachings at this holy place works to sever the Dakota connection to homeland for each successive generation. The [cave’s] star charts connecting this world with the next were blown up, potentially altering the ability of the newly dead to find their new home. It has been said that the storing of alcohol in this collective national womb may have had the power to inflict a spiritual FASD [Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder] on the entire population. (personal communication, 2015)

After the removal of the Dakota, few were left who could speak up for these important Dakota sacred sites. It was not until the media covered a 1977 demand from the American Indian Movement to close Wakan Tipi cave to outside intrusion that public interest in the site increased. From 1999 to 2005, Dakota and Lakota individuals working with various committees made up of federal, state, county, city and neighborhood representatives developed a plan for the restoration of Wakan Tipi. The 106 Group, a Minnesota-based cultural resources management and planning company, facilitated the transformation of Wakan Tipi while sensitively navigating the complex relationships between government agencies, tribes and the public. The 106 Group seeks to integrate preservation planning into community-wide planning efforts to have the greatest impact. They have worked with hundreds of communities across the country to rally around their shared past and preserve cultural landscapes as well as structures. In 2003, the 106 Group was able to get the land that surrounds Wakan Tipi designated as an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) toxic waste site, eligible for EPA Brownfield cleanup funding to remove 50 tons of soil that had been contaminated by petroleum and other substances (“EPA Awards for Vento Nature Sanctuary Cleanup,” 2003, p. 1). In 2005, the 27-acre Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary was opened, the latest colonial name for the home of Wakan Tipi cave.

For countless millennia, Wakan Tipi/Indian Mounds Park was a pristine place of birth,
death and rebirth filled with incredible biodi-
versity until it was destroyed in fewer than five
decades by the settlers who acquired title. It took
another 240 years after Jonathan Carver’s ini-
tial desecration for neighborhood, city, county,
state, federal and tribal groups to begin to align
and revitalize Wakaŋ Tipi and the 27 acres that
surround it.

Although Dakota tribes and Indigenous
individuals have been involved in planning the
restoration of the sanctuary that surrounds
Wakaŋ Tipi cave, there is much that remains
out of their hands. Wakaŋ Tipi and the mounds
above are still best known through the white
male interpreters of their story. In fact, in
searching for information on them you would
most likely find these sites under the names of
Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary, Carver’s Cave,
Brewery Cave or Dayton’s Bluff rather than the
original names given by Dakota peoples.

At one point, the team that was given the
task of restoring the landscape of sanctuary
that surrounds Wakaŋ Tipi cave was instructed
to cut down over four dozen cottonwood trees
and replace them with oak trees planted in
straight rows along the concrete railroad slabs.
Considered “scrub trees” by non-Dakotas, cot-
tonwoods are the ancestor star trees used for one
of the most sacred ceremonies, the Sundance.
Dakota have no interest in highlighting the rail-
road’s proud linear history since it was almost
solely responsible for the destruction of Wakaŋ
Tipi cave. Although Dakota peoples are once
again coming to this sacred site to pray and
learn, it is both heartwarming and heartbreaking,
because the cave and the mounds above are
now enclosed within iron fences and a vigilant
security presence is required as the disrespect
and desecration continues.

With its 1893 designation, the National
Park Service listed Indian Mounds Park as
one of the oldest parks in the region, but it
has long ignored and neglected it. In fact, the
National Park Service (2014) did not list it on
the National Register of Historic Places until
2014, 120 years later. Although the service
acknowledges Wakaŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park
as a significant Dakota site, the rights of the
Dakotas “to their autonomous control and
management of their sacred sites” have not been
recognized, which is considered necessary by
the International Union for the Conservation
of Nature (IUCN) to guard against the imposi-
tion of conflicting dominant values (Wild &
McLeod, 2008, n.p.). The IUCN takes a rights-
based approach to its work and is concerned
with issues of equity and sustainability, which
has not necessarily been the approach taken by
the National Park Service (2014, p. 68).

After researching 11 case studies of
Indigenous peoples and protected areas, Beltrán
(2000) found that when Indigenous peoples are
involved in the management of protected areas
early in the planning process, there are greater
benefits for both the Indigenous peoples and the
management authorities. This was later reaf-
ffirmed by the IUCN, which lists the rights of the
custodians within the overall national protected
framework while providing several case studies
where these sacred national sites have actu-
ally been returned to their original custodians
although they may now live long distances from
the site (Wild & McLeod, 2008). In some cases
the original custodians have made agreements
with other Indigenous peoples or entities to
do the actual caretaking while the Indigenous
peoples maintain control (pp. 68–70).

The IUCN reminds us:

Sacred natural sites and their associated
cultural groups represent deep and diverse
relationships with nature, most of which are
respectful and life affirming, and they con-
tain seeds that humanity needs to cultivate in
order to restore a healthy relationship with the
planet. Traditional wisdom articulates a set of
community values that calls for human beings
to take responsibility for our actions and to
protect the places most dear to us. (Wild &
McLeod, 2008, p. 73)

The revitalization efforts of the nature sanctuary
surrounding Wakąŋ Tipi cave unintentionally facilitated a beautiful coming together of two Indigenous cultures in 2004, the Dakotas and the Hmong, a Vietnamese mountain people who lived in the highlands of Vietnam, many thousands of whom came to Minnesota as refugees after the Vietnam War. For several summers, Hmong youth employed through the Community Design Center (now Urban Roots) as the East Side Youth Conservation Corps worked on vegetation restoration and visited with Dakota elder Garrett Wilson, who often accompanied the authors on our many trips to Wakąŋ Tipi cave. Both groups shared stories of horned serpents and dragons from their cultures and of their sacred ancestral places. This coming together of different experiences to find common ground and to create new stories was what the Dakota leaders of the past did at this site for millennia. We concur with the IUCN that these “sacred natural sites represent the meeting ground of cultural and biological diversity, and working collaboratively to understand and protect these sacred places will strengthen the movement to save the planet’s priceless biological and cultural mosaic” (Wild & McLeod, 2008, p. 73).

Conclusion

In order for reclamation of the Wakąŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park sacred site to truly take place, we felt there was a need to tell a decolonized version of its story. The published stories about this site have primarily been told through non-Indigenous voices. Very little Indigenous research on Wakąŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park existed prior to this study, so while acknowledging mainstream research we felt it was most important to include Indigenous scholarship and the stories of those who have lived the Dakota experience.

Because we are only beginning to understand the cultural teachings of Wakąŋ Tipi, we remain vigilant to the bulldozer’s blade, the archaeologist’s interpretation, and the decisions made by those representing the power that was responsible for destroying the site and for denying the long relationship of the Dakota with this place. Cavendar-Wilson argues that “the spiritual and psychological blow to Dakota populations that came as a result of the destruction, desecration and occupation of this holy site cannot be underestimated” (personal communication, 2015).

The story of this desecrated and damaged sacred site could also have been titled “Once upon a Toxic Sanctuary.” As the planet faces issues of climate change and increasing extinction of species, the story of Wakąŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park gives hope. But without deeper critical examination of the practices that almost destroyed this site and exiled her Indigenous caretakers, hope for this place and all of Maka Ina will be fleeting.

Although progress has been made with restoration, decolonization and reclamation have not been achieved. As recently as 2014, a road project due west of Wakąŋ Tipi disturbed additional Dakota mounds and human remains documented by Lewis (1898) and others as being connected to the culture of Wakąŋ Tipi/Indian Mounds Park. But we hold on to hope and the words of Dakota scholar Waziyatawin (2012), that through “meaningful and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands” (p. 2), decolonization can be achieved if we “engage in the activities of creating, restoring, and birthing . . . and empowerment of Indigenous peoples, working toward our own freedom to transform our lives and the world around us” (p. 3).
## Glossary

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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bdote</td>
<td>literally “confluence of rivers,” also known as Maka Čokaya Kiŋ, the center of the earth</td>
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<tr>
<td>čanuŋpa</td>
<td>prayer pipe and stem</td>
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<td>čekpa</td>
<td>navel or umbilical</td>
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<td>čokaya</td>
<td>center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dakota Oyate</td>
<td>Dakota Nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Háha Wakpa</td>
<td>Mississippi River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kapemni</td>
<td>“as it is above; it is below,” mirroring of earth and sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapoža</td>
<td>village near Wakaŋ Tipi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maka Ina</td>
<td>Mother Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mni Sota</td>
<td>Minnesota, literally “land where water reflects sky”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makoče</td>
<td>amniotic fluid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tamni</td>
<td>celestial bison ancestor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayamni</td>
<td>lodge (noun), they live (verb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T(u/o)ŋwįnį</td>
<td>Blue Star Woman, an auntie midwife who resides in the Big Dipper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ŭŋktehi</td>
<td>horned water serpent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakaŋ</td>
<td>power to create or destroy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakaŋ Tipi</td>
<td>Dakota sacred site located</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakaŋyaŋ Tipi</td>
<td>near present-day St. Paul, Minnesota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakiŋyaŋ/Kiŋyaŋ</td>
<td>Thunderbird(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakaŋjįŋ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakpa Mni Sota</td>
<td>Minnesota River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanaŋi Tačaŋku</td>
<td>road of the spirits, the Milky Way</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## References


