

THE ERADICATION OF THE LAKOTA HEYOKA CLOWN

The Heyoka Clowns were a religious society of Lakota Indians dating back to time immemorial. Heyoka Clown practitioners were called to be devout servants of their divinity, the Wakan Heyoka or the Heyoka God. The Heyokas' religious practice often incorporated humorous ritual and ceremonial performances. Lakota Indians believed that the Heyoka Clowns's actions and behaviors were direct manifestations of this sacred calling. According to Thomas H. Lewis in *The heyoka Cult in Historical and Contemporary Oglala Sioux Society* (1974), "[The Heyoka] had the power to avert disaster for himself and his tribe ..." (18) And, this examination demonstrates, the Heyoka Clowns worked to ensure the well-being of all Lakota Indian people, most especially those Lakota Indians who lived in their same band.

The Heyoka were also known as "backwards" or "contrarian" people who literally walked backwards, wore their clothes backwards, spoke in reverse, and rode their horses facing the wrong direction. (ibid) Such backwards performances were intended to conflict with normal Lakota social behavior. Sam D. Gill explains in *Native American Religions - an introduction* (1982), "... the contrary behavior of the clown threatens disorder, the values of normalcy are defined by contrast with the absurdity of the clown behavior." (75) For example, the Heyoka would complain of being hot when the temperature was cold, they would laugh at sad or tragic situations, and they would mourn positive events like a good hunt. The Heyoka used backwards and contrary behavior to elicit laughter for a variety of reasons. Humor and laughter were used as teaching tools, healing tools, and cultural preservation techniques. Audience laughter indicated the spectator's understanding of the Heyoka's ritual performances as well as their willingness to participate in the Heyoka's sacred ceremonies.

Although the Heyoka used embodied humorous performance to evoke laughter, their role within Lakota society was far more complex than merely being comic figures. Like Catholic priests or Buddhist monks, the Heyoka administered the sacred ceremonies and the instructions of Lakota divine entities. When introduced to the Heyoka's backwards and contrary behaviors, uninitiated European-Americans labelled the Heyoka as "clowns" for their seemingly erratic and inappropriate behavior. Verne F. Ray notes in *The Contrary Behavior Pattern in American Indian Ceremonialism* (1945), "... the name [Heyoka] itself means 'anti-natural.'" (87) Indeed, much of the Heyoka religious practice and performance was misunderstood by early European-American anthropologists and settlers. As such, the Heyoka became known as the "Lakota Sacred Clowns." Similar religious practitioners from other tribes were also labelled as clowns. In *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy* (1992), Dennis and Barbara Tedlock note the Arapaho Crazy Dancers, the Cahuilla Funny Man, the Iroquois False Faces, and the Assiniboine clowns among many others (107).