

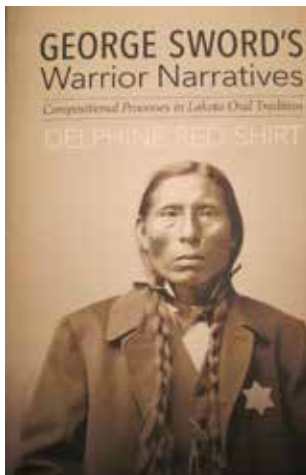
# George Sword's Warrior Narratives: Compositional Processes in Lakota Oral Tradition

By Delphine Red Shirt, 2016 University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln  
ISBN 9780803284395, LCCN 2016039400 (ebook)

Review by Wilson Manyfingers

The subject of this volume is about understanding the oral poetic form and content of the Lakota narrative written by an Oglala man expressing his thoughts from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. George Sword (*Mi-Wa-Kan Yu-Ha-La*) was a Lakota man born in 1847. He was a *wičaša wakan* (Holy Man) conducting on numerous occasions the Sun Dance among the Oglala. He lived through the 19<sup>th</sup> century period when the United States and Lakota battled in sometimes-horrific confrontations. During that time, he took the name “Sword,” noticing as he did that the attacking “white people” wore swords on their sides. In 1896, Miwakan Yuhala (his Lakota name) dictated his life story to Bruce Means, describing his social responsibilities. He later learned to write using the phonetic alphabet in the manner of “old style” Lakota. It is this text on which Dr. Delphine Red Shirt depended for her study of ancient style Lakota. His narrative was presented in the formal style of Lakota. George Sword died of tuberculosis in 1911-12 as measured by the Lakota winter, but his oral tradition survived to become a modern-day view into the old Lakota world.

Oral tradition is the means by which history and historical events, current events, family relationships, dreams, philosophical ideas, rituals and ceremonies, explanations



of natural phenomena, and common inter-personal expression of thoughts are conveyed in society. It is a practice of human communications that preceded any and all literary traditions. Oral “literature” recalls Delphine Red Shirt in this remarkable volume includes some of the most revered works from the past 2,500 years: the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, *Beowulf*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*, and the Mayan *Popol Vuh* to which Red Shirt adds *George Sword's*

*Warrior Narrative*—none of which originated in textual form. Red Shirt points out that no one can actually know how and for what purpose these works were composed since as oral renderings they were presented during a specific time, in a specific context that remains unknown. However, it is clear to the author that these are “oral poetry” evidenced by virtue of accounts describing how they were “composed and performed on the one hand, and structural symptoms of oral composition and performance on the other.” Relying on John M. Foley’s *Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Indiana University Press, 1988) and Foley’s *How to Read and Oral Poem* (University of Illinois Press, 2002), Red Shirt applies the “oral composition theory” in her study of George Sword’s Lakota oral poetry originally delivered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reframed textually by

George Sword himself.

Several central issues affecting the interpretation of oral poetry pointing to Red Shirt's study include the "structural symptoms of oral composition, aspects of "residual oral performance ... [that remains] when an oral poem becomes a text" and the repetition of phrases and themes. George Sword's narrative is said in this volume to be an "oral composition" due to its use of "formulaic phrases and recurrent scenes."

Red Shirt takes the reader through the theoretical basis for her study of the "old Lakota" as presented by Sword. Of particular importance in this theoretical framework are John Foley's four models: oral composition, oral performance in front of a live audience, voices from the past no-longer practiced, aural reception and written oral poems composed in writing. As Red Shirt affirms, George Sword's written narrative is a voice from the past in a language no longer practiced. The author further describes how this range of oral poetic forms appear in George Sword's narrative rendering the narration a significant expression of old Lakota thinking and recitation.

Red Shirt's rendering of the Sword manuscript concentrates on 2000 words of text the major portion of which describes the Sun Dance. His narrative describes the role of the *wičaša wakan* standing behind the Sun Dancer singing sacred songs. The *wičaša wakan* sings, "Day sun, in a good way listen and accept this prayer, when the grasses or plants, their faces appear all different then young boys about that time, these faces you shall see" (taken from George Sword's narrative.)

The author explains that one who speaks modern Lakota will "translate" old Lakota inaccurately since it is essential to understand the context in which the oral recitation was given. Without understanding the context (including the audience, the relationship between

the singer and the audience, the repetitions, the pauses and more) the translation will not be accurate. This is perhaps the most profound insight Red Shirt gives to her reader leading to the conclusion that the same must be true of ancient poems and songs presented by speakers of numerous other indigenous languages from the past and no longer practiced. That Red Shirt's inquiry is suggestive of an effective and appropriate approach to inquiring into other ancient poems and songs is clear. She has accomplished an important step toward revealing the ancient knowledge systems of not only Lakota, but also other indigenous peoples.

It is also clear reading the English narrative written by the author throughout her book that the *old Lakota* creeps into her own writing. She uses "repetition" and an oral style in writing that echoes Sword's style. This is helpful to appreciate the process of iteratively assessing the meaning of ancient oral literature. For this Dr. Delphine Red Shirt is to be celebrated.

Dr. Red Shirt is an Oglala lecturer in Stanford University's Native American Studies, Special Languages Program. She is herself a native Lakota speaker. She is the author of two volumes: *Bead on an Anthill: A Lakota Childhood* (Nebraska, 1977) and *Turtle Lung Woman's Granddaughter* (Nebraska, 2002). In her study of George Sword's oral poetry, Red Shirt elevates the Lakota oral tradition to the highest level of literature. As such, Sword's oral poetry, Shirt suggests, should be recognized and respected by scholars the world over. By raising George Sword's oral poetry to the classical level, she opens scholars and readers of classical literature to the prospect of having access to oral poetry created by the world's indigenous scholars from the ancient past. This is not only a wonderful book to read, it is stimulating to view through an old language how the world looked through oral poetry. Read this book. ■

About the reviewer:

Wilson Manyfingers is a long-time contributor to the *Fourth World Journal* and to other works by the Center for World Indigenous Studies extending back more than thirty years.

This article may be cited as:

Manyfingers, W. (2017). Book Review: George Sword's Warrior Narratives: Compositional Processes in Lakota Oral Tradition. *Fourth World Journal*, 15(2) 91-93.

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