



Adoption Ceremony Ball  
Unknown Lakota artist  
1880-1900  
3 ½" x 3 ½"  
T0333  
<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/969/adoption-ceremony-ball?ctx=16bf62add786965aeceb14ec2ec6652ab254085e&idx=0>

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During the 2022 Otsego Institute, I had the opportunity to view and interact with a hand-sized ball fully beaded in an anthill style or a salt and pepper style pattern. The ball was made in the late 1800s, according to the catalog. The collection record states that the item was an “adoption ball” bought in Santa Fe, New Mexico, made by an unknown Lakota artist.

The ball is decorated with glass seed beads with a predominant green hue; the colors include green, yellow, dark/navy blue, light blue, periwinkle or greasy blue, white heart orange (burnt orange/red-orange), turquoise, and one transparent bead. The description “greasy” or “white heart” is about descriptive language often used by scholars and artists to describe the colors, referring to beads made and distributed during the 1800s. The beadwork is an applique or overlay stitch in which the beads start (or end) in a spiral, and on the opposite side, they end (or start) in single rows. On close inspection of the ball, the thread is visible where the beadwork is loose or missing. The thread looks as though it could be a white cotton thread, except where it appears that some repairs were made to the beadwork. I initially thought the repair thread was black, but it is dark green under the magnifier with light. The beadwork is attached to some type of leather that sheaths an underlying ball. The ball is perfectly round and solid. I was unable to identify the material of the underlying ball. My best guess was that it was made from wood.

As a Sicangu Oglala Lakota tribal member born and raised in my tribal homelands, I was intrigued by the ball because I had never seen an item like it before. I disagree with the catalog record identifying it as an “adoption ceremony” ball. My disagreement is based on my first-hand knowledge of Lakota communities. After further research of community-based artists, I found similar beaded balls for sale in regional shops called “adoption ceremony balls.” Other beaded balls have been identified in other institutional collections, but I am not equipped to critique those items.

In Lakota culture, our specialized ceremonies, like an adoption rite, comprise seven more extensive, formal rituals that utilize a ceremonial pipe. I will avoid getting into the longer description of the other pipe ceremonies or nuances of the ceremonial pipe. I reference these rites to demonstrate the long-standing protocols embedded in Lakota culture that should not be frivolously referenced or assumed. The seven ceremonies have been written about publicly since the formation of the field of anthropology in the United States, accompanying ongoing fascination with Northern plains tribal cultures in popular culture, and can be read in the work of, but not limited to, John G. Neihardt (initially published in 1932 with the most recent publication in 2008), J.R. Walker (1980), William Powers (1982), Raymond J. DeMallie (1987), Joseph Brown in collaboration with Nicholas Black Elk (1989), and more recently with David Posthumus (2017). This list is not comprehensive but offers a small insight into the male-dominated articulations of Lakota ceremonies by non-native authors and academics. Most scholarly researchers and authors writing about Lakota ceremonial life are non-native and continue to privilege a particular biased and subjective account of the ceremony. According to oral histories of Lakota communities, the seven rituals or rites were gifted to the Lakota people by the White Buffalo Calf Woman. They shaped the ethics and morality of Lakota culture.

As far as I understand, Lakota people practice two distinct, very different rites: an adoption ceremony; and a ritual involving “throwing” a ball. The *Hunka* (Making of a relative) ceremony, or adoption ceremony, was historically conducted with adoption wands, not balls (Black Elk & Brown, 1989). The ceremony is performed to publicly announce the adoption of a non-blood relative as kin. The nuances of kinship in Lakota culture cannot be captured in a short description of the Hunka ceremony. Still, I draw attention to the formality of this ritual because of the complications of kinship within the 20th and 21st centuries. Kinship should uphold tribal autonomy and not be based on individual stories of interconnectedness. The hunka ceremony has been misused and appropriated in recent decades, but that is an argument for another essay. Nevertheless, the hunka does not utilize ceremonial balls in any part of the ritual.

Secondly, there is the *Throwing of the Ball Ceremony*, which differs from the hunka ceremony. This public rite reflects upon the journey of all life and is supposed to provide an understanding of the universe as a Lakota person. The ceremony is used more frequently when facing hardships (Black Elk & Brown, 1989). Unlike the young woman’s coming-of-age ceremony, which was a celebration to prepare a young woman to welcome her menstruation times, the “Throwing of the ball” was an opportunity for the community to set intentions and understand our place in the universe. However, the ball utilized in that ceremony was made from hide and stuffed with bison hair. The Throwing of the ball ceremony is rarely performed.

A quick search for “Native American Beaded Balls” among recent online auctions revealed several similar 19th-century beaded balls, which look similar to the beaded ball in the Fenimore collection. I talked with an Oglala Lakota artist Ho Nah Umpi who recently made similar-looking beaded balls. He said, “I used a wooden ball, then I glued leather over it, then stitched the leather pieces together, then after that, I beaded on the leather.” (Social media correspondence October 27, 2022). In conclusion, I am still unsure how and why such balls became identified with any adoption ceremony. The item was probably made for the “ball throwing ceremony” or commercial sale. I am hopeful that further research may shed more light on what appears to be a spurious interpretation of the beaded ball’s function and origin.

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[<https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/bordeaux.pdf>].

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