

Native American Religions

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will:

- Learn about the great variety of Native American religions.
- Learn about the ways in which Native American religions and cultures have been influenced by contact with Europeans.

KEY TERMS

- Mother Earth
- Great Spirit
- Vision Quest
- Native American Church
- Sun Dance

A Timeline of Native American Religions

~1,200,000 B.C.E.	First people arrive in North America. Thousands of years of oral tradition.	1848-52	U.S. acquires Southwestern territories at the conclusion of the Mexican War; beginning of large-scale Euro-American settlement and "Indian Wars"
8,300 B.C.E.	Urban centers in Peru created.	1862	Homestead Act prompts displacement of many Native American communities.
1492	European "discovery" of the Americas; beginning of Spanish conquest and conversion to Christianity.	1863-64	Thousands of Navajo killed by U.S. forces.
1540	Spanish arrive in what is now the Southwest United States and establish Roman Catholic missions; beginning of 150 years of conflict.	1828-1933	Period of Indian Boarding Schools and involuntary conversion to Christianity.
1607	First successful English settlement in North America; beginning of conflict and missionary activity.	1890	Battle of Wounded Knee and the end of "Indian Wars"
		1974	Ghost Dance religion; Incorporation of Native American Church

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A Timeline of Native American Religions (Continued)

1941-45	Navajo serve as code talkers during World War II.	1978	Legalize the use of peyote in religious ceremonies.
1968	Dennis Banks founds the Native American Movement to fight for civil rights.	2004	Dedication of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C.
1990	Amendments to the United States American Indian Religious Freedom Act of		

One of the oldest and most enduring forms of religion is that which is practiced by the various Native American peoples. Because of the role played by Native Americans in North American history over the past 400 years, their religious practices have been of interest not only to scholars but also to the general public. In recent years, more and more attention has been focused on the subject. Native Americans have experienced something of a religious revival and have become increasingly concerned with the preservation of their cultural and religious heritage. Many non-native Americans have turned greater attention to the religions of native peoples because of their emphasis on nature and personal religious experience, and the absence of a formal organizational structure.

When speaking of the religion of Native Americans, we must be aware that we are not speaking of a monolithic structure. The people identified as Native Americans arrived on the North American continent 15,000 to 20,000 years ago.¹ Since then, they have lived in nearly every section of America.² They have resided in many different climates, with differing lifestyles. Some Native American tribes have been hunting and gathering societies, whereas others lived in settled agricultural communities. Some lived in small nomadic bands, while others built towns, cities, states, and empires. Many now live in towns and cities and are integrated into non-native social and economic systems to a high degree. Many more live on reservations established by treaties with the U.S. government.

Many people tend to identify Native Americans with the nomadic hunting peoples who roamed the western plains of North America in the nineteenth century. The lives of these people centered on the pursuit of the bison. However, many of these tribes were at one time primarily agricultural. All of these hunting societies were influenced by aspects of European culture, particularly the horses and guns that made life on the open plains possible. Because of the long time span involved and the many differing lifestyles, it is impossible to talk about one set "Native American religion."

In studying these religions, one must also be aware of the relative dearth of sources. Although Native American life covers perhaps 20,000 years, literary sources exist from only the last 400 years. Most of the early sources are reports of Christian missionaries and explorers, who may or may not have been sympathetic or objective

witnesses. Furthermore, the great bulk of information on Native American religions has been written during the past 100 years—after there had been contact with European civilization, its religions, and its technology. Scholars often debate whether some aspect of these religions truly reflects “pure” Native American religion or whether it developed in response to some aspect of Christianity.¹ While none of the Native American religions have survived unchanged, many have incorporated elements of European culture and religion into native belief systems rather than giving up traditional ways entirely. It is, therefore, still possible to speak of Native American religion in the present tense.

Our primary source of knowledge about Native American religions prior to the arrival of the Europeans is archaeology. Although archaeology can show much about the total culture of a people, it does not tell us much about religion, particularly of those people who did not construct stone monuments or other lasting religious images and structures. Because most pre-Columbian American people were not literate and left few religious artifacts, our knowledge of their religious beliefs is very limited.

To describe Native American religion, we have two major options: We can either describe the specific religion of one tribe at one period in history, or we can make general statements about the entire field of these religions. In this text, we take the second option. Following are some general characteristics of many of the better-known Native American religions.

The Spirit World

To investigate the religions of Native Americans, one might begin by asking whether these religions are basically polytheistic, monotheistic, or monistic. Do they recognize one Supreme God or multiple deities, or do they find the divine present in a variety of forms? Do they follow the theological patterns of Islam and Judaism, or are they more like the polytheistic Graeco-Roman religions with their many gods? Are these religions more like Hinduism, which recognizes a single divine principle that has many outward forms? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to these questions. In one sense, Native American religions are polytheistic. All nature is alive with spirits. Close at hand are the spirits of animals or plants which appear in visions. There are also the guardian spirits of various animals, and there are the spirits of the dead, who live in the land of the dead. Nature is personified in many spirits. At the heart of nature is **Mother Earth**, who provides the bounty of the earth. Thunder and lightning are believed to be individual beings. Therefore, in the broadest sense of the word, Native American religions are polytheistic. Native Americans believe that many levels of gods and spirits exist in the universe.

However, many forms of Native American religion hold that, in addition to the multiple spirits of nature, there is a single Supreme Being. They believe in the Supreme Being in a manner found in many basic religions. These religions take the position that, above and beyond all the lesser deities, there is a High God. However, this High God is separate from the concerns of Earth. Matters of daily life are the business of the nature spirits and sometimes the ancestors. It is to these spirits that one prays and gives attention. The High God is appealed to rarely, perhaps only in an extreme emergency, and is seldom mentioned in religious conversation. Many of the Native American religions take this attitude toward the Supreme Being.



Amah Kachina Dance, Hopi, Arizona, Southwestern United States.
(Neg. # 928460, courtesy the Library, American Museum of Natural History)

Some Native Americans think of the High God or **Great Spirit** as a personal God. Others understand the High God in a more abstract way. For them, the High God is not a personality, but rather a divine or sacred power that is revealed in humans, nature, and the spirit world. The Dakota (Sioux) belief in **Wakan Tanka** is an example of this abstract understanding of the High God. **Wakan Tanka** or the “Great Mysterious” is a creative force found in all beings and spirits. Any object or being that has influence over the course of life is seen as a manifestation of this divine power. Thus, Native American religions have some of the qualities of monotheism, polytheism, and monism.

Animism

Much is made of the contrast between the Native American attitude toward nature and that of the Europeans who came to America. Generally, it is said that Native Americans have a reverent attitude toward the land, trees, rivers, and mountains. On the other hand, the Europeans tended to look upon nature as something to be exploited. Thus, they were willing to sacrifice the beauty and even the life of the land to build a technology that would make life more comfortable and pleasant. Whether this is an accurate characterization of either Native Americans or Europeans is a matter of debate. There are examples of native people who unintentionally abused their environment. In the American Southwest, for example, there are many cases in which

overpopulation and the resulting pressure on fragile desert environments led to the decline of large-scale civilizations and long-term environmental change. There are also Europeans who love and respect nature. In general, however, Native Americans have a more reverent attitude toward nature than do most European Americans. This reverence for the land and for nature in general is at least in part the result of the fact that survival within traditional Native American cultures depended on living close to and in balance with nature, rather than on changing the environment to suit human needs.

The term *animism* has been applied to Native American religions by some scholars. In the strictest sense of the word, an animist is one who believes that the trees, rocks, rivers, plants, and animals are spiritually alive. The animist believes that the spirits that exist in nature have the power to help or harm. Therefore, the animist offers some form of worship to these spirits. Native American religions are animistic in a sense: These religions teach that the Supreme Being lives in all creation. If the Supreme Being lives and manifests itself in nature, nature should be respected and cared for. Therefore, nature is not seen as an object to be named by humankind. Rather, one must seek to live in harmony with nature.

Hunting was an important part of life in many Native American cultures. Because Native Americans did not keep large domestic animals prior to the arrival of the Europeans, wild game played an essential role in the diets of native people. Animal hides and bones were important raw materials for making clothing, tools, ornaments, and religious objects, and for constructing dwellings. Hunting was also a religious pursuit in which the hunter saw the animal as a fellow creature with a similar spirit. Therefore, a hunter prayed to the spirit of the animal before the hunt. Only those animals that were absolutely needed were killed. After the hunt, one asked the animal for forgiveness. Care was taken to use every part of the slaughtered animal. Nothing was wasted. Sometimes animal bones were buried in such a way that they might be exhumed and used later. These practices were in marked contrast to the actions of Euro-American hunters, who slaughtered great herds of bison for their hides or tongues and left the bulk of the animal to rot. The Euro-American type of hunting led to the destruction of the herds on which many Native Americans depended.

Native Americans who practice agriculture revere the soil, plants, and trees. The soil is often personified as Mother Earth. Planting and harvesting are surrounded with rituals and taboos. Plants, like animals, are thought to have spirits and are treated as persons by many Native Americans. For many Native American people, farming is a religious activity. Many of the Hopi of the Southwest continue to grow corn because of its religious meaning, even when the great bulk of their food comes from "modern" sources. Even the gathering of clay for the production of pottery is done with an understanding of the life in the soil. The Papago women of southern Arizona speak of the clay that they dig for pots: "I take only what I need. It is to cook for my children."²⁴ Even the cutting of wood has religious overtones. One makes an offering to the tree before cutting it. No wood is wasted because trees are sacred and, like humans, have feelings that must be respected.

The reverent attitude of the Native American toward nature and its contrast to that of many whites is best summarized in the words of a Wintu:

From the Source

The White people never cared for land or deer or bear. When we Indians kill meat, we eat it all up. When we dig roots we make little holes. When we build houses, we make little holes. When we burn grass for grasshoppers, we don't ruin things. We shake down acorns and pine nuts. We don't chop down the trees. We only use dead wood. But the White people plow up the ground, pull down the trees, kill everything. The tree says, "Don't! I am sore. Don't hurt me." But they chop it down and cut it up. The spirit of the land

hates them. They blast out trees and stir it up to its depths. They saw up the trees. That hurts them. The Indians never hurt anything, but the White people destroy all. They blast rocks and scatter them on the ground. The rock says, "Don't! You are hurting me." But the White people pay no attention. When the Indians use rocks, they take little round ones for their cooking. . . . How can the spirit of the earth like the White man? . . . Everywhere the White man has touched it, it is sore.²⁵

This tale is as much about the coming of the Europeans as it is about the role of nature in Native American religious thought. It is also an example of the way in which many Native Americans understand their relationships with the beings of the natural environment. Rocks, for example, are more than minerals. They are intelligent beings that can communicate with humans. Reverence for nature was part of Native American religion prior to contact with Europeans. Most likely, the encounter with European farmers and ranchers led Native Americans to emphasize this aspect of their religion as they saw environmental change lead to the destruction of their ways of life. Differing understandings of nature and its role in human culture became one of the ways in which Native American peoples distinguished themselves from white settlers. As non-native Americans have become increasingly concerned about the preservation of the natural environment, they have found Native American spirituality increasingly attractive.

Contacts with the Spirit World

Native American people do not tend to see the universe as being under the control of one Supreme God, in the pattern of such religions as Judaism or Islam. They are primarily interested in the day-to-day life among the multiple kinds of beings found in the world. The bulk of their religious attention was directed toward achieving good relations with the spirits of the earth, the forests, the streams, and the animals on which they depended. For Native Americans, the purpose of ritual is not so much to control nature but to communicate and establish good relationships with the spiritual beings that share the world with humans.

Sacrifice

Most of the religions of the world have practiced some form of sacrifice as a way of pleasing the deities.

Religion and Violence

Throughout history, animals, grain, wine, beer, and sometimes humans have been sacrificed to the gods. Such sacrifices are rare in the religions of the native peoples of what are now the United States and Canada, although human sacrifices were an important element of the religions of the Aztec and some other native peoples of Central and South America.⁸

When it occurs, sacrifice is understood as being a gift to the spirits in exchange for assistance to human beings. Some rituals, such as the **Sun Dance** of the native peoples of the Great Plains, require self-torture or sacrifice. This is seen as a way of acquiring the spiritual power necessary for human survival.

Medicine bundles, which are made from animal hides and bones, plants, and minerals, are also sources of spiritual power and are greatly valued both by the people who make them and by those of subsequent generations who treat them as living beings. Many native people are concerned that the medicine bundles found in museums may be in danger of death. While power and gifts are important concepts in native religions, the great blood sacrifices found in many religions are generally not a part of their worship.

Taboos

One of the ways Native Americans protect themselves from possible danger from the spirit world is through taboos. The concept of taboo, as it applies to Native American religions, may be defined in the following manner:

Taboo are all actions, circumstances, persons, objects, etc., which owing to their dangerousness fall outside the normal everyday categories of existence.⁹

A taboo is a kind of religious action that enables people to avoid doing things that would offend the spirits of nature and the ancestors. A collection of widely held taboos relates to menstruating women. These were particularly strong in societies that depended largely on hunting for survival. In many cultures, women are believed to have special powers for either good or evil, but the menstruating woman is thought to be particularly powerful. During this time, she is obviously set apart by the spirit world as one who can participate in the miracle of child production. Many of the Native American peoples believed in the unusual power of a woman at these times in her life. Therefore, during menstruation, a woman was kept away from ordinary society. In some communities she was required to leave her family and live in a special location because her power could make her especially damaging to the magic necessary for a hunt. It was believed by some that even a glance from a menstruating woman could destroy the hunting ability of a man for the rest of his life. Her gaze could also destroy the magic of hunting weapons, and her presence in the forests might drive away the game forever.

Another widely observed taboo is the avoidance of the dead. No matter how beloved a person may have been in life, the fear is that after death the spirit will continue to stay around its former home and perhaps attempt to take friends and family. At best, the spirits of the dead might haunt their families, causing them bad dreams. This taboo is still widely observed. Among the Navajo and other tribes of Arizona and New Mexico, dead bodies, and even the clothing, belongings, and houses of the dead, are greatly feared, to the extent that many are reluctant to touch the bodies of the victims of automobile

and other accidents. Except in extreme emergencies, their care is left to non-native people. Despite this fear of the dead, Navajo have served in the United States Armed Forces in large numbers, many in combat units. Taboos concerning the bodies of the dead may help to explain the high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder and related problems of drug and alcohol abuse among Navajo veterans.

Taboos concerning the dead led Native Americans to be greatly concerned about their final resting places. Often, steps are taken to keep the bodies in the grave and away from contact with the human world. Sometimes, the names of the dead are not spoken for years after their death. In some Native American societies, the dead were buried by special members of the tribe, and not their immediate families. These corpse handlers were considered to be ritually unclean for a period of time after they had touched the body. They were separated from the community for a period of several days and forbidden to eat the regular food of the tribe. Burial grounds and human remains continue to be both sacred and feared and should not be disturbed for any reason. Concern with the dead and their resting places has been the cause of many controversies between Native Americans and the scientific community. Archaeologists and other scientists often study human remains to learn about the diets and health of prehistoric peoples. Native Americans are greatly troubled by what they view as dangerous disrespect for the dead, and they have fought for the return and reburial of the remains discovered and studied by archaeologists.

Ceremonies and Rituals

Along with the observance of taboos, Native Americans often seek to control the forces of the spirit world with ceremonies. As is the case with many other religions, ceremonies are extremely important to the Native Americans. The purpose of their ceremonies, rituals, songs, and dances is not necessarily worship. They are a means of renewing the partnership between humans and the spirit world. Frequently, they involve dancing, singing, fasting, ordeals, bathing, and the observance of certain taboos.

One of the most common elements in Native American religions is the use of dance as a means of contacting the spirit world in preparation for some special event in life. Dance is an event in which the entire community participates. It is used to prepare the tribe for the hunt, for the agricultural season, or for the celebration of tribal gatherings and, previously, the preparation for war. It is also used in the rites of passage. Whatever the occasion, dance is accompanied by song, the beating of drums, the shaking of rattles, and the playing of sacred flutes. The song may be made up of only a few lines repeated over and over again, or it may tell the story of creation or of the great heroes of the past. Some songs speak of the spirits of animals such as deer or bison. The drumbeat might be nothing more than several people beating on a log with sticks, or it might involve complicated rhythms played on animal skin drums, but the hours of song and steady rhythm are hypnotic. Long hours of dancing in this atmosphere prepares the participants for contact with the spirit world.

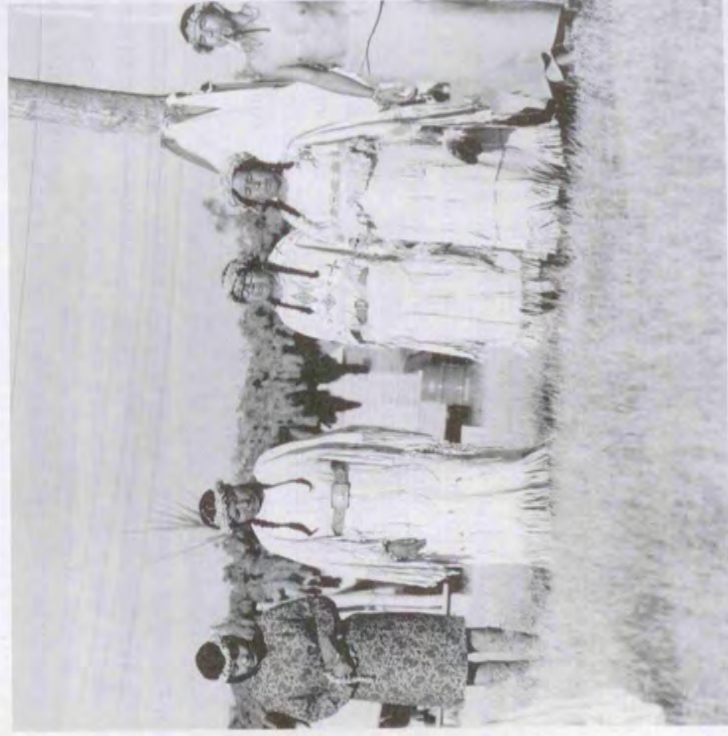
Among those tribes whose livelihood depended on hunting, rituals prepared the hunters for their work. Hunting, like agriculture, tended to develop highly religious societies because of its capricious nature. During one season, the hunters would go forth and find an abundance of game, their weapons extremely accurate and effective. In the next season, the same hunters could find game scarce or their weapons virtually useless. Therefore, the spirits of the animals and the hunters themselves, along with their weapons, had to be

properly prepared to ensure success. The following is a description of a Pueblo ritual before a hunt:

One of my most dramatic memories is that of standing in the plaza of a Pueblo, in the dark of a January morning, to watch the Mother of Game bring in the deer. It was almost dawn when we heard the hunter's call from the hillside. Then shadowy forms came bounding down through the pinon trees. At first we could barely see the shaking horns and dappled hides. Then the sun's rays picked out men on all fours, with deerskins over their backs and painted staves in their hands to simulate forelegs. They leaped and gamboled before the people while around them pranced little boys who seemed actually to have the spirit of fawns.

In their midst was a beautiful Pueblo woman with long black hair, in all the regalia of white boots and embroidered manta. She was their Owner, the Mother of Game, but she was also Earth Mother, the source of all live things including man. She led the animals where they would be good targets for the hunters, and one by one, they were symbolically killed.⁸

A ritual such as this could be called sympathetic or imitative magic. Those persons imitating the game animals in the ceremony were symbolically called forth and killed in



Oglala Sioux Sun Dance, Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, United States.
(*South Dakota Department of Tourism*)

the belief that during the actual hunt the real animals would be similarly killed. Because of the identification of a kindred spirit between Native Americans and their game, the ritual of the hunt also included a merciful killing of the animal and festive treatment of its body. For example, there are reports in which hunters apologized to the animal before they killed it. Afterward, the body of the animal was brought back to the tribe and was treated as an honored guest.

The Vision Quest

To gain special power at some point in life, Native Americans often seek visions that put them in contact with the spirit world. Visions are especially sought for young people at the time of puberty. Early in life, children are taught that one day they must go alone into the wilderness and seek a vision of the spirit world. When the time for a vision quest arrives, the young person may be sent away from the family and required to live alone until a vision is received. The vision quest is often accompanied by several days of fasting. Usually, the young person on a vision quest lives without food, perhaps without water, and with only the barest of possessions and clothing. This is done to make the individual appear poor and humble before the spirits. Sometimes, the young person's face and body are painted to resemble some special member of the tribe. When the vision comes, the spirits often appear in the guise of animals in a dreamlike or trancelike state. When this happens, the animal becomes the special guardian of the young person, whose name may be changed to include this animal. This practice is known as totemism. The animal that appears in the vision is believed to have a close spiritual bond with the young person throughout life. In some Native American societies, there are also totems for clans or other family groups. The vision may also be of a man or a woman. If the vision does not appear after two or three days of fasting and prayer, the young person may feel compelled to take more extreme measures. One might cut his or her flesh or even chop off a finger as a sign of sincerity. When the vision finally comes, the young person returns to the community as a full member of the group, having moved through this rite of passage.

Visions are sought by Native Americans at other times in life. In the past they were particularly important on the eve of great battles, when extraordinary strength was needed to achieve honors. Visions were also connected with hunting, particularly during the days of the great buffalo hunts in the nineteenth century. Today, they are sought at times of political, economic, or spiritual crisis, and when a person is contemplating a life-changing decision such as marriage, running for a political office, or moving from a rural reservation to an urban area for employment or education.

An example of a communal effort toward achieving visions is the Sun Dance, practiced by the people of the Plains. This dance takes place in summer, often at the solstice, when the heat of the sun is near its peak. Participants in the dance seek a vision and an identification with the divine. They gather in a lodge especially built for this purpose. The center of this lodge is a sacred pole, cut from a tree chosen for the dance. The dance usually lasts three days and nights. During this time, the dancers fast and dance continually. On some occasions and among some tribes, the Sun Dance once involved putting thongs through the flesh of the pectoral muscles of the dancers and hanging them from the center pole of the lodge to attach the dancer to the source of the divine. Because it is dangerous to stay too long in the spirit world, the dancers had to free themselves quickly. At times, the thongs tore through the flesh. As gruesome as this sounds, it apparently inflicted no permanent injury.⁹

Religious Leadership

Native American religions are remarkably free of a priesthood. Although there are those in every tribe who have special connections with the spirit world, basic religious functions are performed by every member of the group. In a sense, Native American religions are very personal in that they encourage individuals to contact the spirit world alone. Prayers, dances, songs, and visions are all performed by every member of the tribe, according to each person's need—not by the specialist in religion. Because there is very limited use of sacrifice, there is little need for the trained professional to perform a ritual on behalf of the untrained layperson—the procedure so common in many other religions. Nevertheless, among Native Americans, several categories of religious specialists are used occasionally in encounters with the spirit world.

The specialist most often connected with Native American religions is the so-called medicine man or woman. The designation "medicine man" was given to the functionary by early white settlers because they recognized this person as one who specialized in healing. To the traditional Native American, sickness is caused by the invasion of the body by a foreign object and healing comes about when the foreign body is removed. It is the job of the healer to remove such objects. The medicine man receives power through visions from the spirit world, which give him power over the forces that cause sickness. The spirits may appear after a period of fasting and prayer, or sometimes without any preparation. They usually take the form of a special animal, such as the bear or badger, because these two animals are connected with healing in Native American mythology. The spirits do not take possession of the healer; they only appear and instruct on a frequent basis, perhaps giving a song or instructing in taboos.

Because of this special contact with the spirit world, medicine men and women are empowered to heal, but they can also curse and bring sickness and even death to those

who incur their wrath. This power brings a great responsibility to those who are recognized as healers. If medicine men or women encounter a sickness too serious to be healed, they can claim that it is the work of a more powerful person. But if a number of patients are dying, the healer can be held responsible for the deaths and can even be executed. These beliefs often lead to accusations of sorcery and witchcraft.

The healing process sometimes consists of a sucking ritual. If sickness is caused by the intrusion of a foreign object into the body, it is the healer's job to remove the object. Thus, the healer attempts to literally suck the offensive object or spirit from the body of the sick person. This ritual is often accompanied by songs, dancing, or incantations. At other times, the patient is given various herbs and teas to alleviate pain and induce healing.³⁰



Sand paintings are an important element of Navajo healing rituals. (Neg. # 2A3642 (photo by Bottin), courtesy the Library, American Museum of Natural History.)

Other Means of Contact with the Spirit World

One of the most common elements of Native American religions is the use of tobacco and the sacred pipe in religious ceremonies. Tobacco smoke, a form of incense, is a link with the spirit world. In the past, tobacco was a part of many ceremonies; it was smoked when people gathered to talk of peace, war, or the hunt, and it was smoked by the medicine man during healing ceremonies.

Tobacco was originally grown and used only for religious purposes by Native Americans, although many Native Americans now smoke on a regular basis. One of the reasons tobacco was reserved for special religious occasions was that it was far too strong to be used more frequently. The tobacco used in religious ceremonies is *Nicotiana rustica*, which is far stronger than the tobacco used in cigarettes. The fumes of this tobacco are so strong they can be intoxicating. Smokers who have tried Indian tobacco marvel that anyone is ever able to smoke the six or more puffs required in Native American ceremonies.

The ritual tobacco is occasionally smoked in cigarettes rolled from corn husks, but it is more frequently smoked in pipes. The bowls of these pipes are made from either clay or stone and the stems from reeds. Sometimes, the most ceremonial of the pipes have stems up to four feet long. They are often decorated with paints and feathers and, in the past, were carried into battle or the hunt as tribal talismans.

The use of peyote in Native American religions has received a great deal of attention in recent years. Peyote has been used in religious ceremonies for centuries by the people of Mexico. The practice has spread to North American tribes over the past 100 years.



A Navajo wedding ceremony. (The Vest Collection, Inc.)

Peyote is a small, spineless, carrot-shaped cactus growing in the Rio Grande Valley and southward. It contains nine narcotic alkaloids. In pre-Columbian times, the Aztec, Huichol, and other Mexican Indians ate the plant ceremonially, either in the dried or green state. Peyote produced profound sensory and psychic experiences lasting twenty-four hours, a property that led the natives to value and use it religiously.¹¹ One of the alkaloids found in peyote is mescaline. After a certain quantity of peyote is eaten or ingested in a tea, mescaline produces hallucinations and visions. It is because of these

Religion and Violence

With the military defeats and humiliation Native Americans suffered at the hands of the U.S. government at the end of the nineteenth century, some began to turn to peyote ceremonies. Previously, the vision was sought only occasionally—at the rite of passage at puberty, prior to a great hunt or battle, or by the medicine man at crucial points in his life. However, when

so little was left to the Native Americans, and when they had been defeated and crowded into reservations, many felt the need for more frequent visions. Therefore, the peyote cult grew and developed rituals. Today, it plays an important role in the religious lives of many Native Americans, particularly in the Southwestern United States.¹²

colorful visions that peyote has been made a part of some religious ceremonies. Peyote and related substances are used by healers and others seeking knowledge and experience of the spirit world in many of the native cultures of South and Central America.

In the early part of the twentieth century, there developed an amalgamation of the peyote cult and a form of Christianity. Many Native Americans had been taught the principles of the Christian religion but also appreciated the values of their own religion and peyote. Some reasoned that Christians used wine and a wafer in celebrating communion and Native Americans used the peyote button and tea in communing with the spirit world. In 1918, the Native American Church, a group that blended Christianity and the peyote cult, was legally organized in Oklahoma. In 1944, the movement became nationwide and was called the Native American Church of the United States. In 1950, it expanded to include Canadian Indians and was called the Native American Church of North America. Currently, it is estimated that this religious movement has about 225,000 members. Members of the Native American Church differ considerably about the importance of Jesus and the Bible. Extreme traditionalists are concerned almost exclusively with



A Mission Church in Guadalupe, Arizona, a Yaqui community in the Phoenix metropolitan area. (Mark R. Woodard)

traditional beliefs and practices. On the other end of the continuum are church members for whom Christianity is of central importance. The entire range of viewpoints may be found in a single community. There is an unspoken rule that one does not criticize the views of other church members. Many members of the Native American Church refer to peyote as medicine and are convinced that it helps them to cope with and heal from the psychological wounds brought on by war, domestic violence, and alcohol and drug abuse.

The use of peyote in Native American religions has had a running battle with the various courts of the United States. In the early part of the twentieth century, peyote was outlawed by many states because it was considered a narcotic. In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld state laws that banned the use of peyote in Native American Church rituals. Many Native Americans felt that restrictions on their use of peyote in religious ceremonies violated constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion.¹³ An amendment to the Native American Religious Freedom Act passed by Congress in 1994 now permits the use of the substance in Native American ceremonies. The government of Mexico has placed the cactus on an endangered species list and has prohibited its export.

Death and Life after Death

In discussing the beliefs of the Native Americans about death and life after death, we must be reminded again that we are discussing a great variety of people who lived in various climates and had diverse cultural systems. Therefore, attitudes toward death and practices regarding death varied widely. Furthermore, Native Americans have been exposed to Christian eschatology for more than 400 years. It is difficult to distinguish the original Native American view of the dead from the view that evolved in response to Christianity. Therefore, one can no more speak of the Native American concept of life after death than one can speak of the Native American religion; one can only generalize.

As we have noted, Native Americans tend to fear the dead and handle them with great care lest they return and somehow trouble the living. Many of the most serious taboos of Native American life are built around the treatment of the dead.



Young Tlingit dancer standing next to a totem pole, a deeply meaningful object to the coastal peoples of the Pacific Northwest. (Corbis/Bettmann)

Yet despite the fear of the dead, there is apparently little fear of death itself. Missionaries, anthropologists, and other observers have noted again and again the remarkable lack of fear demonstrated by Native American people when facing death.

Generally, traditional Native Americans seem to believe in two souls, neither of which could be considered immortal. One soul is the life, or breath, that accompanies the body. When the body dies, or at least when it decays, this soul also dies. The second soul is what might be called a free soul. This soul wanders about during dreams or leaves the body during sickness. After death, this free soul goes to the land of the dead. Little is said about this land of the dead; sometimes it is considered a happy place, and sometimes it is a place of sadness. Often, the land of the dead seems to be a continuation of this current life but on another plane of existence. Most descriptions of the land of the dead seem to indicate that all go to this land. There is no heaven for those who have been righteous and no hell for those who have been wicked.

Some attempt to aid the deceased in the journey to the land of the dead by burying food and drink with the body. In the past this was sometimes carried further when an important person died. An attempt was made to send along a guide to aid the deceased in finding the land of the dead. Sometimes an animal was killed to act as guide, and on other occasions, an enemy was killed for the same purpose. Among the Natchez people of Mississippi, when a great chieftain died, large numbers of wives, children, friends, and animals were sacrificed to accompany the dead.¹⁴

When the free soul reaches the land of the dead, it does not necessarily live forever. Perhaps, like the Hebrews' concept of Sheol or the Greeks' idea of Hades, traditional Native Americans believe that the soul exists in the land of the dead only as long as the person is remembered by the living. When the person begins to be forgotten, the free soul begins to fade and eventually disappears.

Occasionally, among Native Americans, references are made to a belief in reincarnation. Sometimes an infant resembles a deceased relative in some fashion, and it is believed that the ancestor might have returned to live again. However, this feature is missing from most Native American religions. There seems to be no widespread belief in reincarnation. Neither is there an emphasis on ancestors in the manner of the Chinese.

Native American Religions Today

With the arrival of European settlers and their religions, Native American cultures have undergone severe stress. In what is now the United States, there were many wars as European settlers moved east from the Atlantic coast and north from Mexico. The last of these, and one of the most tragic, was the consequence of white Americans' fear of the Ghost Dance religion. By 1890, when the movement began, almost all of the Native American peoples had been forced onto reservations. The buffalo on which they had formerly depended had nearly vanished. Many faced starvation because the United States government had failed to deliver the supplies it had promised. The Ghost Dance movement began among the Paiute of Nevada and rapidly spread across the Great Plains. The Ghost Dance religion combine elements of Native American religion including visions, song and dance, and Christianity. Wovoka, the founder of the movement, believed that he had been visited by Christ, who had taught him songs and dances and foretold the destruction of the white people and the return of the ancestors and the buffalo.

In what is now South Dakota, many of the Lakota people believed that the "ghost shirts" worn by the dancers would protect them from army bullets. On December 29, 1890, units of the U.S. Army 7th Cavalry attempted to disarm a band of Lakota at Wounded Knee. A single shot rang out, after which the soldiers used machine guns in a massacre of men, women, and children. As many as 350 Native Americans died. The Massacre at Wounded Knee marked the end of Native American resistance to the United States government. To this day, the Lakota and other Native American peoples have not forgotten what transpired that day.

One of the first acts of the settlers was to seek to convert Native Americans to Christianity. This movement has continued, with varying degrees of success, for more than five centuries. Governments often supported missionaries, thinking that the conversion to Christianity would help to pacify groups opposed to European encroachment on their territory. Some forms of Christianity insist on an all-or-nothing conversion. For native people, this meant that to become Christian they had to turn their backs on their former religion and culture. Other forms of Christianity are more open to native customs and, at least to some extent, religious ideas. The influence of Christianity has been so strong that today most Native Americans are Christians. But Native American Christianity is as complex and variable as the cultures in which it is found. Some Native Americans have almost completely adopted the European style of Christianity. Others have added Christian symbols and myths to native religions. Most Native Americans would probably place themselves between these two extremes.

Many traditional practices and beliefs are continued even by those Native Americans who consider themselves devout Christians. A belief in the power of spirits to cause illness, and of medicine men and women to cure it, is found even in the most urbanized Native American communities. On many reservations, curing combines Native American and biomedical treatment. In hospitals on the Apache reservation in the White Mountains of Arizona, two types of medical practitioners exist. Medical doctors and nurses work by day; the night medicine men and women, many of whom outwardly function as custodians and support staff, perform traditional healing rituals. In many cases, this combination of healing practices is seen as cooperation rather than competition. Increasingly, medical specialists from both traditions have come to respect the healing powers of one another.

Many Native American Christians celebrate Christian holy days in very traditional ways. This is particularly true of Good Friday and Easter, which celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Throughout South and Central America and the Western United States, Holy Week is celebrated with Native American song and dance. Among the Yaqui of Arizona and northern Mexico, Jesus Christ is often associated with the deer because both represent a sacrifice so humans may live and prosper. Many modern Native American songs speak of characters from Bible stories as well as native spirits. Visions of Jesus Christ and his mother, the Virgin Mary, are common in many Native American communities.

Some Native Americans have incorporated elements of Christianity and even missionaries into their own traditions. This practice helps to explain the appeal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) to Native Americans. Mormons believe that Native Americans are the children of the lost tribes of Israel and that Jesus Christ preached in the Americas during the period between His Crucifixion and Resurrection. This enables some Native Americans to understand Jesus and Christianity as being less foreign. Other Native Americans understand the God of Christianity as being

similar to the traditional High God. Christian ritual also can be understood in native terms. In the 1930s, missionaries on the Lakota (Sioux) reservations often observed that hymns were the most effective means of drawing Native Americans to the church. Perhaps it was the Native American belief in the power of song and dance that attracted them to mission churches. Missionaries and their children were often given native names, carrying them into both the community and the spirit world.¹⁵

In recent decades, traditional Native American religions have experienced both revival and change. Numerous groups have reasserted the values of native culture, including religion. These groups teach that traditional ways are better for Native Americans than those of other cultures. Therefore, there is a resurgence of interest in the study and practice of traditional religion. There are also new developments, including intertribal dances and ceremonies based on aspects of Native American tradition shared by more than a single tribe. These ceremonies reflect and help build a growing sense of Native American cultural identity that transcends tribal boundaries.

There also is a growing interest in Native American arts and religion among non-native peoples, particularly those attracted to “new age” philosophies and religious movements. Native Americans have mixed reactions to this. Many welcome the growing recognition of the universal value of their traditions. Others are concerned that traditional knowledge, objects, and rituals will fall into the hands of non-native people who do not fully understand or appreciate them. This concern has led some Native American artists to make minor changes in traditional music performed or recorded for non-native audiences and to produce works of art that reflect Native American values and symbols that are, from the perspective of Native American religious traditions, secular in nature.¹⁶

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Are Native American religions best described as monotheistic, polytheistic, or monistic?
2. Give several examples of animism as it relates to hunting and agriculture.
3. List some of the major taboos of Native American society.
4. What is the purpose of the Sun Dance?
5. In Native American thinking, what is the primary cause of sickness? How should it be cured?
6. Discuss the use of peyote in religious ceremonies. How is peyote involved in the Christian communion ritual in the Native American Church?
7. Distinguish the view of death in Native American religions from that of the traditional Judeo-Christian position.
8. Describe the meaning of music and dance in Native American religions.
9. What is the purpose of the vision quest?
10. How have Christianity and contact with non-native cultures influenced the development of Native American religions?

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