

## Group observances

Indigenous ways are community-centered. Through group rituals, traditional people not only honor the sacred but also affirm their bonds with each other and all of creation. Humans can help to maintain the harmony of the universe by their ritual observances.

In order to maintain the natural balance and to ensure success in the hunt or harvest, ceremonies must be performed with exactitude. For instance, there is a specific time for the telling of specific stories. Chona, a Tohono O'odham (Papago) medicine woman, told anthropologist Ruth Underhill:

*I should not have told you this [the origin of Coyote, who helped to put the world in order, with a few mistakes]. These things about the Beginning are holy. They should not be told in the hot time when the snakes are out. The snakes guard our secrets. If we tell what is forbidden, they bite.<sup>30</sup>*

Rituals often take people out of everyday consciousness and into awareness of the presence of the sacred. In such altered states, participants may experience a heightened group consciousness that powerfully binds individuals together as a community.

Each group has its own ways of ritual dedication to the spirits of life, but they tend to follow certain patterns everywhere. Some honor major points in the human life cycle, such as birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and death. These rites of passage assist people in the transition from one state to another and help them become aware of their meaningful contribution to life. When a Hopi baby is twenty days old, it is presented at dawn to the rays of Father Sun for the first time and officially given a name. Its face is ritually cleansed with sacred cornmeal, a ceremony that will be repeated at death for the journey to the Underworld.

Girls commonly go through a special ceremony marking their first menstruation, which signals the end of childhood and preparation for becoming wives and mothers. For both boys and girls, the rituals of reaching puberty typically involve separation from the community, a transition phase in which they are secluded with no clear identity and prepared for adulthood, and then a third phase in which they are reincorporated into the community with a new adult identity. Girls in traditional Lakota households spend the transition time in practicing such useful skills as stitching and cooking. Madonna Swan reports that she was secluded in part of her grandmother's cabin for her first moon ceremony, and that each day her grandmother would coach her in domestic skills and ethical principles. Her grandmother and mother daily bathed her in water with purifying sage and green cedar, and prayed for her in this fashion:

*Grandfathers above and in the four directions, make Madonna a good woman. Help her to treat guests with hospitality. Grandfathers, help her to be a good worker. Grandfathers, and Maka Ina (Mother Earth), help Madonna to be a good mother. I pray that the food she cooks in her life will be good for those that eat it. Grandfathers, help her to be a good wife and live with the same man all her life. Grandfathers, bless her with healthy children.<sup>31</sup>*

There are also collective rituals to support the group's survival strategies. In farming communities these include ways of asking for rain, of insuring the



Women's Health  
Rituals, p. 48  
DIANE BELL

growth of crops, and of giving thanks for the harvest. In the Great Drought of 1988, Sioux holy man Leonard Crow Dog was asked by three non-native Midwestern communities to perform rainmaking ceremonies for them, thus honoring the power of the traditional medicine ways.

Ritual dramas about the beginnings and sacred history of the people engage performers and spectators on an emotional level through the use of special costumes, body paint, music, masks, and perhaps sacred locations. These dramas provide a sense of orderly interface among humans, the land, and the spiritual world. They also dramatize mysticism, drawing the people toward direct contact with the spirit world. Those who have sacred visions and dreams are supposed to share them with others, and often this is done through dramatization.

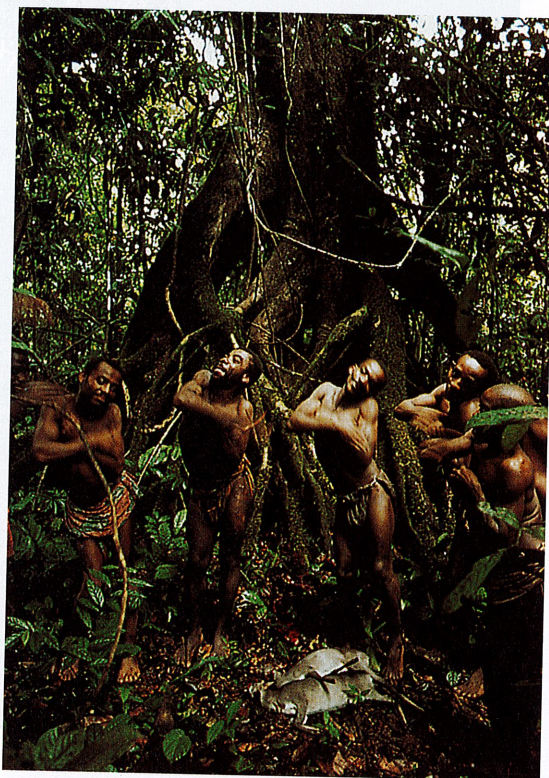
According to legend, the Plains Indians were given the sacred pipe by White Buffalo Calf Woman as a tool for communicating with the mysteries and understanding the ways of life. The bowl of the pipe represents the female aspect of the Great Spirit, the stem the male aspect. When they are ritually joined, the power of the spirit is thought to be present as the pipe is passed around the circle for collective communion with each other and with the divine.

Groups also gather for ritual purification and spiritual renewal of individuals. Indigenous peoples of the Americas "smudge" sites and possessions, cleansing them with smoke from special herbs, such as sage and sweetgrass. Many groups make an igloo-shaped "sweat lodge" into which hot stones are carried. People huddle together in the dark around the stone pit. When water is poured on the stones, intensely hot steam sears bodies and lungs. Everyone prays earnestly. Leonard Crow Dog says of the *inipi* (sweat lodge):

*The inipi is probably our oldest ceremony because it is built around the simplest, basic, life-giving things: the fire that comes from the sun, warmth without which there can be no life; inyan wakan, or tunka, the rock that was there when the earth began, that will still be there at the end of time; the earth, the mother womb; the water that all creatures need; our green brother, the sage; and encircled by all these, man, basic man, naked as he was born, feeling the weight, the spirit of endless generations before him, feeling himself part of the earth, nature's child, not her master.<sup>32</sup>*

Pilgrimages to sacred sites are often communal. Buryats gather on top of Erde, the mountain where the spirit of the earth lives, and all join hands to encircle it; a great energy is said to appear in the huge circle. The Huichol Indians of the mountains of western Mexico make a yearly journey to a desert they call Wirikuta, the Sacred Land of the Sun. They feel that creation began in this place. And like their ancestors, they gather their yearly supply of peyote cactus at this sacred site. Peyote has the power to alter consciousness: it is their "little deer," a spirit who helps them to communicate with the spirit world.

*To the Efe Pygmies of the Ituri rainforest, the Great Spirit is embodied in the forest itself, a benevolent presence that is both Mother and Father. Pygmy men perform a dance of gratitude to the forest for the animal food it provides.*



## RELIGION IN PRACTICE

## The Sun Dance Way of Self-Sacrifice

Sacrificing oneself for the sake of the whole is highly valued in most indigenous traditions. Through purification ceremonies, the people attempt to break through their small selves in order to serve as clear vehicles for the energy of the Great Spirit. In the Americas a powerful ceremony for these purposes is the sun dance. Among the Oglala Lakota, participants may dance for four days without food or water, looking at the sun and praying for blessings for the people. They say the ceremony as they practice it was first given to them through a vision received by a man named Kablaya.

In diverse forms, sun dances are now performed at many sites each spring and summer, most of them

on the midwestern and northern plains of North America. In theory, only those who have had visions that they should perform the dance should do so. Some come in penance, for purification; others offer themselves as vehicles to request blessings for all people or for specific people who need help. It is not considered proper to dance for one's own needs.

Dancers make a commitment to do the dance for a certain number of times. Some sun dances include women dancers; some who dance are children. Non-indigenous people are generally barred from dancing.

The power of the sun dance requires that everything be handled in a sacred way. Dancers must do vision quests and purify themselves in sweat

lodges before the ceremony begins. In spite of thirst and exhaustion, those in some sun dances continue to participate in sweat lodges each day of the dance. A tree is chosen to be placed at the center of the circle (among the Lakota, it is always a cottonwood, which when cut crosswise reveals a multi-pointed star pattern representing the sun).

The tree's sacrifice is attended with ritual prayers. Participants may string prayer flags onto its branches before it is hoisted in the center of the dancing circle.

During the dance itself, the participants are guided through patterns with symbolic meanings. The choreography varies from one group to another. The Sioux sun dancers do not move around the circle except to shift slightly during the day so that they are always facing the sun. In Mexico the patterns continually honor the powers of the four directions by facing each one in turn.



*Sacred tree at the center of an area prepared for a Mexican version of the Sun Dance, Tonal Mitotianilitzli. Cloth strips tied to the tree carry prayers for the people.*

As they dance, the dancers blow whistles traditionally made from the wing bones of the spotted eagle, but now often whittled from hollow sticks. When giving instructions for the dance, Kablaya reportedly explained, "When you blow the whistle always remember that it is the voice of the Spotted Eagle; our Grandfather, Wakan Tanka, always hears this, for you see it is really His own voice."<sup>33</sup>

At a recent sun dance held in Mexico, one participant\* reports:

*When the energy of the Dancers was probably at their lowest and most exhausted, nearing the end of a very long and hot and sunny day, an eagle flew overhead and kept circling the Dance for maybe five minutes, flying back and forth, and again and again to the sound of the Dancers' whistles and the Huehuetl drum. It brought tears to the eyes of many. The Dancers just kept whistling and saluting and greeting the huge and graceful bird. I have often seen an eagle fly over our circle during the Dance for a minute, but never have we seen one just keep circling and returning so long. It was truly breathtaking, like a message from the Creator that all was well, and our prayers were heard.*

A group of people support the dancers by singing special sacred songs and beating a large drum. If their energy flags, so does that of the dancers. A woman sun dancer says that after a while, "The drum is no longer outside of you. It is as if in you and you don't even know that you're dancing." The dancers also support each other in ways such as using the feathers they carry to fan those whose energy seems low. There may also be communal vision ceremonies.

Each dancer is the carrier of a sacred pipe. Between rounds, these may be shared with group onlookers who are led into the circle and who pass the pipes around among the dancers to strengthen them with the power of the smoke.

Non-dancers may also be led into the circle for a special healing round on the third or fourth day. By that time, the dancers have been so purified and empowered that they can all act as healers, using their eagle feathers as instruments to convey the divine power.

The suffering that each dancer willingly undergoes is heightened during piercing. For those whose visions suggest it—and whose tribes use piercing, for some do not—at some point during the dance incisions are made in the skin of their chest, back, or arms and sharpened sticks are inserted. There are then various ways of tearing through the skin. One reserved for chiefs is to drag buffalo skulls from ropes attached to the piercing sticks, symbolizing their carrying of the burdens of the people. More often, ropes are thrown over the trees and attached to the piercing sticks. Each person who pierces is then pulled upward, "flying" by flapping eagle wings, until the sticks break through the skin. It is thought that the more one asks when making the sacrifice the more difficult it will be to break free. One Lakota dancer was instructed in a vision that he should be hung from the tree for a whole night. They had to pierce him in many places in order to distribute his weight, and then pull him down in the morning.

Why must the dance involve so much suffering? A Lakota sun dancer explains, "Nobody knows why, but suffering makes our prayers more sincere. The sun dance tests your sincerity, pushes your spirit beyond its limits." And as the dance goes on, many of the dancers transcend their physical agony and experience an increasing sense of euphoria. A Mexican dancer explains:

*It's not pain. It's ecstasy. We get the energy from the sun and from the contact with Mother Earth. You also feel the energy of the eagles [who often fly overhead], all the animals, all the plants that surround you, all the vegetation. That energy comes to sustain you for the lack of food and water. Also when you smoke the pipe it serves as food or energy; the smoke feeds you energy so that you can continue. And every so often we put our palms to the sun to receive the energy from the sun. You can feel it in your whole body, a complete bath of energy.*

\*Names of individual dancers interviewed are not given here, to preserve their privacy and the sacredness of the dance.



*In West Africa, the gods and the spirits of the dead appear to the living in masquerade. The mysteries of spirit are made semi-visible by costumed initiates.*

self-determination, collective work, family-centeredness, purpose, creativity with limited resources, and confidence—and reward each other for progress by giving gifts.

### *Individual observances*

In indigenous sacred ways, it is considered important for each person to experience a personal connection with the spirits. The people acknowledge and work with the spirits in many everyday ways. For instance, when searching for herbs, a person is not to take the first plant found; an offering is made to it, with the prayer that its relatives will understand one's needs. Guardian spirits and visions may be sought by all the people, not just mystical specialists. The shaman may have more spirit helpers and more power, but visionary experiences and opportunities for worship are available to all. Indigenous traditions have therefore been called "democratized shamanism."

Temples to the spirits may exist, but one can also worship them anywhere. Wande Abimbola observes:

*Big temples aren't necessary to worship the orisa, even though there are temples for most orisa in Africa. If you are a devotee of Ifa, you can carry the objects of Ifa in your pocket. If you want to make an offering to Ogun, put any piece of iron on the floor and make an offering to it. It's just like a Christian would carry a Bible or maybe a cross.<sup>34</sup>*

To open themselves for contact with the spirit world, individuals in many indigenous cultures undergo a **vision quest**. After ritual purification, they are sent alone to a sacred spot to cry to the spirits to help them in their journey.

When indigenous groups are broken up by external forces, they lose the cohesive power of these group rituals. Africans taken to the New World as slaves lost not only their own individual identity but also their membership in tight-knit groups. In an attempt to re-establish a communal sense of shared spiritual traditions among African-Americans, Professor Maulana Ron Karenga created a contemporary celebration, Kwanzaa, based on indigenous African "first fruits" harvest festivals. Using symbolic objects to help create a special atmosphere (such as candles, corn, fruits and vegetables, and a "unity cup," all called by their Swahili names), families and groups of families meet from December 26 to January 1 to explore their growth over the past year. They look at their own experiences of the "seven principles"—unity,



This altar in the home of a Mexican healer illustrates the blending of indigenous ways with those of later religions. The serpent, masks, vegetables, eggs, and "bird's nest" derive from indigenous sacred ways, but are juxtaposed with Christian symbols.

Pre-puberty or the onset of puberty is commonly thought to be the best time for vision quests, for children are closest to the spirit world. Among the Dene Tha, children are informally encouraged to go out to the bush before the age of puberty and spend time alone, seeking a spirit helper. Intimate knowledge of the animal spirit is considered essential for a Dene Tha who helps others:

*When you are young, you go alone in the bush and you stay there and an animal comes to you. He talks to you just like we do now [sitting next to each other], and he tells you about him and with his power he gives you his power to heal other people. With it you heal people. If it tells you all how he is from beginning to end, you help someone, you cure him. If he does not tell everything, and you do not know all about him, then, when you help someone, you cure him, but you get the sickness.<sup>35</sup>*

Adults may also make vision quests before undertaking a sacred mission, such as the sun dance. Indigenous Mexican leader Tlakaehl describes the vision quest as he observes it:

*You stay on a mountain, desert, or in a cave, isolated, naked, with only your sacred things, the things that you have gained, in the years of preparation—your eagle feathers, your pipe, your copal [tree bark used as incense]. You are left alone four days and four nights without food and water. During this time when you are looking for your vision, many things happen. You see things move. You see animals that come close to you. Sometimes you might see someone that you care about a lot,*

*and they're bringing water. You feel like you're dying of thirst, but there are limits around you, protection with hundreds of tobacco ties. You do not leave this circle, and this vision will disappear when they come to offer the water or sometimes they will just drop it on the ground. Or someone comes and helps you with their strength and gives you messages.<sup>36</sup>*

One is not supposed to ask for a vision for selfish personal reasons. The point of this individual ordeal, which is designed to be physically and emotionally stressful, is to ask how one can help the people and the planet.

## Contemporary issues

Sadly, traditional spiritual wisdom has been largely obliterated in many parts of the world by those who wanted to take the people's lands or save their souls with some other path to the divine. Under the slogan "Kill the Indian and save the man," the American founder of the boarding school system for native children took them away from their families at a young age and transformed their cultural identity, presenting the native ways as inferior and distancing them from normal participation in the traditional sacred life. They were exposed to the "modern" worldview, which does not believe in miracles, supernatural healings, or divine intervention—thus contradicting thousands of years of received wisdom in their own tradition.

Native Americans who converted to Christianity have sometimes been missionaries themselves, helping to spread Christian devotion among indigenous peoples. Sometimes Natives converted to try to appease the dominant non-Natives, but sometimes it was the personal example of these missionaries that caused Native Americans to embrace the "White Man's Faith," even though it was the religion of those who were oppressing them. A young nineteenth-century Choctaw Christian named Kanchi, for example, drowned while trying to save teenagers whose raft swamped as the Choctaw tribe crossed the swollen and turbulent Mississippi River under forcible removal from their ancestral lands. So touched were they by his sacrifice that the tribe members began reading his Bible in his memory and eventually formed a new Christian community in what is now Oklahoma. Indigenous spirituality has become so mixed with Christianity that many Native American Christians are now trying to re-examine their religious lives and identities honestly. Marie Therese Archambault asserts:

*When we read the Gospel, we must read it as Native people, for this is who we are. We can no longer try to be what we think the dominant society wants us to be. ... We just learn to subtract the chauvinism and cultural superiority with which this Gospel was often presented to our people. We have to go beyond the white gospel in order to perceive its truth.<sup>37</sup>*

A similar policy of attempted acculturation was conducted between the 1880s and 1960s with Australian aboriginal children. Taken away from their parents by force, the "stolen generation" were often abused or used as slaves. Five children of Eliza Saunders were taken away by social workers while she and her husband were looking for employment. She recalls, "You walk miles and miles and find