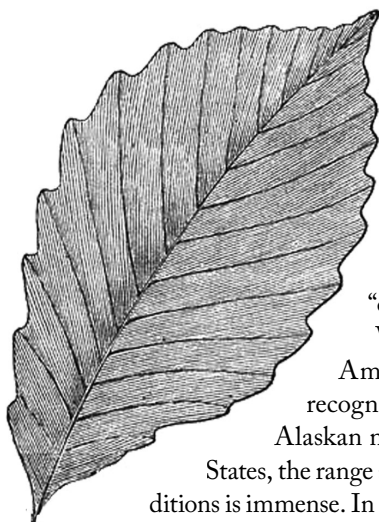




Indigenous Traditions— North America

A common belief among indigenous peoples of North America is that everything on Earth and in the universe has a soul and is animated by spirit—although with over 560 recognized tribes in the United States alone, there is considerable variation to the theme. Many peoples consider land and water and everything that lives on it and in it to be sacred, a belief that often—but not always—lends itself to a sustainable lifestyle.

Native Americans today practice a wide variety of religious traditions, from their original indigenous ways to Christianity and combinations of the two in unique forms of syncretism. It is important to note that most North American tribal spiritual leaders do not refer to their practices as “religion”; instead, they refer to “spiritual traditions,” “sacred ways,” and “spiritual ways of life.” The term *religion* is often associated with European, Middle Eastern, and European-American institutions based on holy texts, prophets, and monotheism. This differs significantly



from the sacred ways of native peoples who have site-specific, Earth-centered, spiritual ethics and practices based on intergenerational oral teachings often referred to as “traditional knowledge,” “natural laws,” or “original instructions.”

With 4 million reported American Indians and 562 recognized American Indian and Alaskan native nations in the United States, the range and diversity of spiritual traditions is immense. In Canada, there are 1,172,790

reported aboriginal people living in more than six hundred First Nation, Métis, and Inuit bands and off-reserve communities. In Mexico, there are approximately sixty distinct indigenous groups that speak over sixty unique languages. The indigenous cultural diversity within and between these three North American nation-states is vast and complex—vast because of inherent cultural diversity (ethnic, linguistic, philosophical, and artistic) and complex because of the severe changes in traditional practices due to numerous waves of colonialism which tribes responded to, accommodated, and resisted in numerous resilient ways.

There is an almost unfathomable variety of indigenous religious and spiritual expressions in North America—from Inuit traditional shamans in northern Canada to Mormon Paiutes in the U.S. Great Basin; from Yaqui syncretic Catholics in the southwestern United States and Mexico to Lakota Sun Dancers in the plains of the United States; from Native American Church worshippers to urban mixed-blood (Métis, Mestizo, Creole) pan-spiritualists in major North American cities. From this vast diversity, the major Native American spiritual practices can be grouped into four main categories: (1) traditional, (2) Christian or other major religion, (3) syncretic—a unique combination of Christian and traditional spiritual practices, and (4) pan-tribal—an intertribal blend of varied spiritual beliefs, practices, and ceremonies. This article will focus on the first category, the traditional spiritual teachings of North America—the precolonial spiritual philosophies, ethics, and ceremonies.

Key Concepts

Given all of the geographic, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of Native American spiritual traditions, some consistent key concepts can be generalized and summarized.

These teachings originate in the oral tradition and can now be found in published forms. In terms of philosophy and belief, most native spiritual traditions are considered holistic and animistic. They originate in ideas that the spiritual and material worlds are intimately entwined and that nature is an embodiment of sacred and spiritual energies. Therefore, everything on Earth and in the universe—plants, animals, clouds, humans, rocks, and so forth—has a soul and is animated by spirit. This belief is also often called pantheistic, meaning that the source of the universe, the universe itself, and nature (including humans) are all merged as part of one sacred, spiritual creation. These teachings support the idea that the divine or sacred is both immanent and transcendent, with the emphasis on immanent, prioritizing a more personal and intimate relationship with the sacred in daily life.

Native Americans often refer to their teachings as the “original instructions” because, according to their cosmologies and cosmogonies, they were the first spiritual teachings given to them, in their own languages, by their Creator or Creators in the Creation Time. Each native language serves as the foundation and medium for distinct philosophical, psychological, and intellectual perspectives that are often impossible to interpret within a Western worldview and the English language. These original, oral instructions are like the holy texts of other religions except they are more spoken, personal, and dynamic. Within these oral instructions are specific ethics, values, lessons, and worldviews that explain how to live a spiritually healthy, balanced, and good life in harmony with other humans and the Earth. These spiritual values are infused with practical science and observation to support the survival and regeneration of the people and all that the people need to survive—food, water, shelter, clothing, and medicine. To support this regeneration, many Native nations, like the Yurok Tribe of northern California, practice world renewal ceremonies to literally “keep the Earth in balance.” These values and practices could also be called an embodied sustainability in the sense that they help a particular group of people sustain themselves within a specific ecosystem and traditional homeland.

A common spiritual instruction that Native Americans share is the perception and understanding that a Great Power and Great Mystery exists in the universe that is ultimately unknowable to the human mind. This power reminds humans to be humble and grateful for the gifts of life. In dreams, visions, death, darkness, and the unknown, there is a Great Mystery that must be revered and placated. This value in, and respect for, Mystery helps humans

realize that they are part of a larger universal cycle of life and death, creation and destruction, and that reverence, humility, and humor are aids for peaceful living.

Two other interrelated concepts central to Native American spiritual traditions are kinship and reciprocity. Native peoples understand that they are intimately and personally connected, as if in a family, to the extended family of the natural world. Through food, water, breath, and other needs, humans depend on the plants, animals, soils, climate, and sun for their nourishment and continuance. Therefore, they are holistically interrelated to all that lives, especially to the “kin” in their local environment. The Raramuri ethnoecologist Enrique Salmon has called this “kincentric ecology”: “Indigenous people view both themselves and nature as part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origin. It is an awareness that life in any environment is viable only when humans view that life surrounding them as kin” (Salmon 2000, 1327). Since

humans depend on nature for survival, they must treat

it with care, respect, and honor, and make

offerings and sacrifices to these other

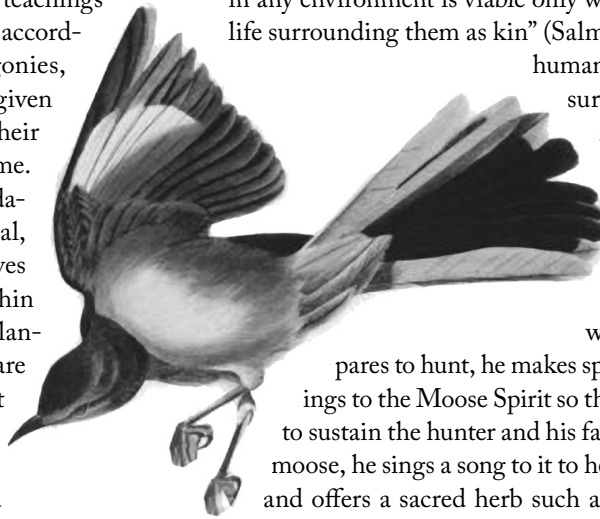
life forms and their spirits. For example,

when a Cree hunter pre-

pare to hunt, he makes special prayers and offerings to the Moose Spirit so that it will give up its life to sustain the hunter and his family. After he kills the moose, he sings a song to it to help its spirit be at peace and offers a sacred herb such as tobacco, sweetgrass, or sage to symbolically and literally thank the moose and reciprocate for the gift of its life. This emphasis and practice of reciprocity is extremely important and exhibited in numerous ways when gathering, collecting, or hunting food or medicine. It is also expressed when exchanging gifts or trading with friends, family, or folks at traditional gatherings, ceremonies, or powwows. This spirit of kinship and reciprocity is also encouraged with all peoples, including strangers and people from different backgrounds. In this sense, Native American spiritual traditions teach about the importance of cultural pluralism, intercultural respect, and the gift economy.

Traditional Rituals and Ceremonies

According to Carl Waldman’s *Atlas of the North American Indian*, the North American religious traditions “can be seen as a diffusion and cross-fertilization of two distinct cultural traditions: the Northern Hunting tradition and the Southern Agrarian tradition” (Waldman, 67). Animal worship, shamanism, ritual healing, and interspecies

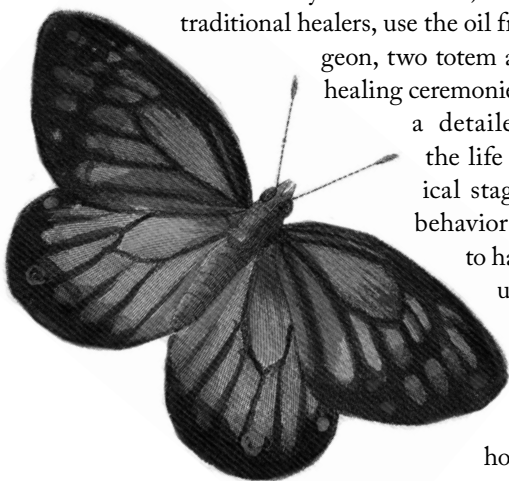


communication characterize the Northern Hunting tradition. The Southern Agrarian tradition is part of elaborate seasonal and agricultural cycles of planting, growing, and harvesting foods at certain times. In these tribal systems, priesthoods and religious institutions are more formalized and hierarchical with secretive and esoteric forms of worship.

Many of the ceremonies and rituals practiced by Native Americans from both of these generalized traditions involve sacrifice, the quest of a vision, and use of music, dance, art, and plant and animal medicines to shift one's consciousness from the ordinary to the supernatural. Sacrifice is emphasized in the Lakota sweat lodge and Sun Dance ceremonies where fasting is required and one is purified through intense heat, sweating, dancing, and prayer. Fasting is very common in many tribal traditions where a young person enters a rite of passage and seeks a vision through fasting alone in nature for a specific period of time, often for four days and nights. This practice is often called a vision quest. Other ceremonies involve group activities where the four elements (air, fire, water, earth) are used with particular songs and dances to make offerings to ancestors, plants, and animals, or Earth spirits. The Pueblo Corn Dances of the American and Mexican Southwest are examples of these group rituals of giving thanks to the Corn Mother through elaborate group songs, dances, and offerings. The Huichol of Mexico use their sacramental plant peyote as a medicine to induce altered states of consciousness and communication with unseen spirits and energies.

All of these rituals and ceremonies require an intimate understanding of the local ecology and web of relationships. Therefore, land and water and the life that lives on and within them are considered sacred and personal. The landscape must be cared for and tended in a familial and regenerative way. The Hopi of Arizona use certain clays and dyes in their ceremonies and sacred arts; thus, they must have a practical and scientific understanding of geology, soils, and geography for sustainably harvesting these clays over thousands of years. Likewise, Midé priests, Ojibwe traditional healers, use the oil from bear and sturgeon, two totem animals, in special healing ceremonies. They must have

a detailed knowledge of the life cycles, physiological stages, anatomy, and behavior of those animals to harvest, extract, and utilize those oils in healing ways. In this sense, native religion, science, and art merge as a holistic way of living.



All of these rituals occur in sacred places in specific native lands and waters. Therefore, the concept of holy lands and sacred places is central to all Native American traditions.

Kinship Ecology and the Ecological Indian

For food, medicine, clothing, shelter, sacred practices, and daily nourishment, Native Americans historically practiced extensive and intensive land management that was guided by ethics of restraint, sacrifice, moderation, reciprocity, gratitude, and celebration. Due to their elaborate belief systems revolving around kinship and reciprocity and practical expressions and behaviors involving offerings to the natural world, Native Americans have often been called the “first ecologists” or “original environmentalists.” The label of the “ecological Indian” is met with both approval and disdain by native peoples of North America. On one hand, indigenous peoples throughout the world are the only groups of humans who have demonstrated living sustainably within their local ecosystems for thousands of years before colonialism radically disrupted their ways of life. On the other hand, some native groups have also overexploited natural resources and either moved or disappeared due to that overexploitation. Regardless of which position one takes, it is still considered a stereotype to label Native Americans as ecologists rather than getting to know who they are as individual modern people with diverse views, opinions, and practices. Even though many native peoples have expressed highly complex and sophisticated ecological philosophies and practices, to say “all Native Americans are ecological” is overly romantic, essentialistic, and problematic.

Religious Freedom Struggles and Controversies

Native Americans today face ongoing threats to their sacred ways as many tribes struggle to maintain relationships with their sacred places and have access to their traditional medicines and ancestral lands. Religious freedom is still difficult and controversial for Native Americans as many non-natives misunderstand, stereotype, and discriminate against native peoples and their spiritual beliefs and practices. For example, the people of the Winnemem Wintu nation of northern California struggle to protect their sacred sites from being again flooded by the expansion of a river dam. Another threat to Native American spiritual traditions is the New Age Movement where “white shamans” and “plastic medicine men” fake Native American traditions and charge non-natives large amounts of money to participate in so-called ceremonies. Extractive industries such as mining, logging, damming, and military

uses continue to threaten and destroy Native American shrines, burials, emergence places, and origin sites at an alarming rate. Industrial land uses, New Age commercialism, cultural stereotypes and ignorance, and governmental restrictions are some of the main factors that threaten the religious freedom of today's Native Americans.

Despite these and other major challenges to Native American religious freedom and spiritual expression, today's Native Americans continue to practice traditional sacred ways. As the Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke has stated, these time-tested spiritual traditions illustrate a worldview not based on conquest. They demonstrate a much needed philosophy, ethics, and embodied practice of ecological kinship and intergenerational responsibility.

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