A General Introduction to Native American Religions

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The first people to enter North America did so over a land bridge composed of ice across the Bering Straight about thirty thousand years ago. They were of Mongoloid stock, very similar to those people who inhabit central Asia today, and, of course, they still resemble those people to a great degree. Recent genetic research has proven that all the resulting native people who spread across North and South America are, in fact, descended from a relatively small band of people. A very recent report claims that all aboriginal people in North and South America are genetically descended from clans centering around only four women! In any event, the ice age ended, the ice retreated, and the land-bridge over the Bering Straight disappeared. From that time on the flora and fauna of the Americas has been on its own, including Homo Sapiens. In many ways, it is remarkable how little intercultural contact there was between other peoples and those that developed in the Americas. On the positive side, this allowed the dissemination of tribes, languages and peoples to occur unhindered. On the negative side, it left completely unprepared the Native Americans when outside contact finally did occur, both to cultural disturbances and diseases that had never been seen (and thus adapted to) in the Americas. The population of Native Americans was estimated at over one million in 1492 when Columbus “discovered” the Americas, but it quickly decreased to 850 thousand in the early seventeenth century and
then to 250 thousand by the middle of the nineteenth century. This decline in population was due to warfare, disease and the general policies of genocide pursued by colonists from Europe against the Native Americans. It is impossible to view the religions of the Native Americans without taking into account the impending sense of tragedy and doom that this decimation engendered. Such desperate religious cults as the Ghost Dance which will be mentioned later are examples of this.

Still, for the most part, the religions and spiritual practices that developed in the Americas among the original inhabitants were entirely naturalistic and organic. There was no spread of any philosophical faith (based on any disseminated teaching) such as Islam, Christianity or Buddhism. Primarily, in fact, the religious beliefs of the Native Americans, even today, are based on nature worship, animism and shamanism, thus most resembling those of ancient cultures around the globe that predated all philosophical religions.

It must first be understood that as the peoples of the Americas multiplied and spread out over thousands of years, they also became distinct from each other. Different languages, customs, modes of dress and, of course, religious beliefs evolved. This is why we, the writers of this paper, refer to the process, and end results, as organic. Though they all have the same roots, the resulting cultures are considerably different. Thus any information conveyed about such a widely diverse set of beliefs and cultures is doomed to be extremely general, and will leave out many exceptions and anomalies. This paper will only cover North American Native Peoples, from here on to be called Native Americans or Indians.

There are several major problems in examining Native American religions. The first is that there is very little first-hand evidence or documentation among most tribes as most Native American peoples had no written language but hieroglyphic systems that only conveyed the most rudimentary information,
most of which was abstract or mythological. Most Native American tribes functioned on an oral tradition and all the important ceremonies, rituals, historical facts and so on were memorized or put into symbolic form so as to trigger the memory or understanding of people who encountered it. Though many consider the lack of a written language to indicate a less sophisticated or more "primitive" culture, this is simply not the case. Native Americans had unique and amazingly complex customs, social organizations, arts and so on. They developed remarkable philosophies and myths, yet they did not develop (for the most part) systems of writing. The second problem is, simply, that most of them are dead and gone, and most of their traditions, legends, customs and religious rituals are also gone. The history of aggression, disease and deprivation directed against Native Americans by Europeans and Americans is obvious and needs not be repeated here. Most of what we have been left are first-hand observations and interviews by early anthropologists and historians of various tribal cultures, but they date no earlier than the 1800's, long after contact with European cultures. The foremost of these people was the founder of what we know of today as anthropology, Prof. Levi-Strauss. He spent years studying and working with the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest and even compiled several dictionaries of their languages, all of which were transliterated into the English Alphabet. Yet these accounts and writings are very few and as the Indian Nations of America were militarily and socially broken (some, like the California Native Americans, exterminated) so were their histories and traditions destroyed.

The third problem is the nature of the religious ideas and teachings themselves. They were (and where still practiced, are) very fluid and open-ended. As mentioned, there are no concrete texts or static dogmas, for the most part, involved. Much as Taoism in China, early animistic religions in Africa, or early Shinto in Japan, Native American religious practices focused on the practical and spiritual combined within the setting of nature. Though the
myths were, in a sense, a set religious history of the tribe, they could be constantly reinterpreted and retold with changes. It was considered an art form in most Native American cultures to be able to tell a great story. Since most of these stories had been told many times before, new, different interpretations were always being produced. This is why anthropologists often have several versions of the same myth or why they can get a dozen different explanations for a particular ritual practice. In short, Native American religious practices and traditions are not static. Again, we would like to use the term "organic" in that they are (or were) living, changing, adaptable systems of relating to the natural spiritual world. In this they showed a unique artistic sophistication that is startling. One example is that when white police entered the region of the Bella Bella tribe of British Columbia, they were quickly absorbed into the mythic reality of the tribe and appeared as distorted masked figures as part of the Noonmal or Fool Dance ceremony. The basic concept is that one deals with the changes in one's reality by recognizing that they are really newly-discovered parts of the Spirit World, not by imposing a strict philosophical interpretation on it from an already-held set of beliefs. To Europeans coming to America, all Native American practices were "devil worship" because they did not fit into the Christian reality. They were "bad" and not part of the accepted belief system. On the other hand, some Native American tribes quickly recognized the existence of the new "white god," Christ, and accepted him as one of many gods and spirits that they held in awe. They figured (logically) that if the Europeans had come so far and become so powerful, their god must be strong! Yet the process of actual conversion to Christianity often met with resistance and violence because once an Indian converted he was usually forced to abandon his culture and native religious beliefs. Baptism to them was a threat to their cultural identity as well as a cause of conflict between those who became Christian and those who did not in that each tribe was a closely-knit community. The most
successful conversions took place where there were few white men, and the process of spreading the religion took place from Indian to Indian and from tribe to tribe, without the necessity of completely abandoning all the tribal traditions.

"They took the whole Cherokee nation, put us on this reservation, took away our ways of life...," so Mark Lindsay sings in *Indian Reservation (The Lament of the Cherokee Reservation Indian)*. Both militarily and religiously, the removal of traditional customs, languages and homelands perpetuated the continual oppression of the Indians by white Europeans and, later, Americans. One example of Native American reaction to this was a movement that was military and religious in nature called the Ghost Dance. It arose around 1870 and for over 20 years spread its messianic message across the central United States. Led by a Paiute Indian named Wovaka, men and women wearing long white coats danced all night conjuring the spirits of the dead to aid them. The teaching was that a great Indian leader was emerging who would lead all the Indians to an eternal paradise where their ancestors had been reborn. This Heaven was a rebirth of the world that existed before the white men arrived and was free of all the evil brought by them. This movement claimed to make the soldiers invincible and its aims were to drive the white men from the land and create a new "golden age," though it was eventually crushed by the U.S. Government. Another reactive movement amongst Native Americans was a new religious movement called Peyotism that began spreading just as the Ghost Dance movement was dying out. Peyote is a hallucinogenic cactus that, when eaten, can induce religious visions. Believers in Peyotism saw that God had placed power in the cactus and those who ate it with special rituals could relate directly to the Spirit and God. It generally mixes Native American spiritual beliefs with Christian ideas and stresses brotherly love, family love, financial independence and other honorable goals. Though outlawed by the U.S. Government, as were most Native American religious practices, it was
accepted as legal in 1918 and is now known as the Native American Church with a current membership of 200,000.

The final problem in studying Native American religions is that most of the rituals, traditions and ideas are, by their very nature, secret or inexplicable to a non-Indian. What makes a mystery a mystery is the fact that it is passed down to only a select group in great secret with dynamic ceremonies. It has been rare that any white people have been allowed into the inner sanctum of a Native American Dancing Society or a Medicine Circle. The powers and practices that make a person a powerful shaman or medicine man are, essentially, subjective. The visions and dreams that form the core of the Native American religious experience can not be seen by others, even though the symbols that they contain and that are later related to other tribe members may be recognizable, but only within the context of that tribe and its myths. For example, a rising sun, seen in a vision, would mean different things to a Pueblo Indian and to an Iroquois Indian, and both of these interpretations would be all but incomprehensible to a white American.

In any event, with all of these ideas in mind, here is a general survey of the main points of Native American religious practices and traditions.

**MYTHS**

If, as Joseph Campbell says, rituals are merely the reenactment of myths, many of the Native American rites serve to remember, transmit and act out myths central to the tribes cosmology. This is indeed the case and the myths and symbols of a tribe are consistently and increasingly important to each member as he or she grows from birth into adulthood. The first myths told to a child are often those of creating and naming. Many Indian myths are titled like “How the Salmon Came to Be,” “Why the Sky is Blue” or “How the Rabbit Got Long Ears.” The more important ones concern major creations
or naming of things by cosmic forces, gods or spirits. The Hopi people emerging from the "Fourth World," the descent of the Great Spirit to the Plains tribes as the White Buffalo, the finding of the primal people under a clam shell by the great Raven Spirit, all of these and a million more all serve to explain how things were created, why they are the way they are and what one's relationship is to the world. These myths are often similar to complex dreams, and, according to many scholars like Carl Jung, they have their origin in the same place. Most modern people who believe that science and rational objective facts are the definition of reality would have an impossible time grasping the Native American "dream world." Native Americans generally pay great attention to dreams and visions, and the former is especially regarded with seriousness. These are direct gateways into the myth-world of the unconscious mind. To give you some idea, here is a well-known myth in the Pacific Northwest entitled "How the Moon and the Sun Got in the Sky":

One day the great Raven Spirit was playfully flying about when he thought of a great plan. He had seen the Great Spirit with these beautiful glowing toys and he wanted to play with them, but the Great Spirit would not allow him to do so. At that time Raven was very beautiful: his feathers were pure white, and, of course, he was very vain about it. He snuck into the Great Spirit's Lodge House and stole the two beautiful balls, one of which was the Sun, the other being the Moon. He flew quickly into the sky, but suddenly the Great Spirit saw him and threw a bolt of lightning at him with great anger. The lightning burned Raven and he let go of the two globes with a cry. That is why the Sun and the Moon are in the sky today and why Raven is now black.

These myths are often creative and powerful. They tell many things: why the mountain is always covered with snow, how the people learned to fish, why people die and so on. These are not rational nor do they often have any logical genesis. Also, as mentioned, they are often contradictory. The
important thing is that they show a very different kind of world-view, one
that sees all things as alive and in constant change, that is, in short, spiritually
creative and inhabited by a variety of beings.

It is not uncommon for a tribe to see itself as having descended from a
particular totem animal. Thus an Indian would often be known as so-and-so
of the Bear Clan or of the Raven Tribe. In the Pacific Northwest, inter-tribal
marriages would eventually produce families that had mythic access to many
different animal-spirit lineages. To document this history, Totem Poles carved
with the many animal totems in that family's history would be set outside the
lodge house. Raven found the first primal men under a clam shell, and those
who claim lineage from those first men are of the Raven Tribe, actually des-
cended from the raven. Wolf put on human skin for a time and thus the Wolf
tribe began, so it goes. Yet totem animals may not just be part of the mythic
beginning of one's tribe and may have a special power that one invokes or that
puts its mark on one for a particular reason. Certain warriors who entered a
dancing society would automatically become associated with the power of a
special animal, and other societies would adopt other totems. Sometimes it was
personal identification.

Sometimes the mythic initiatory process would be individual in nature.
A young person who went out on a "vision quest," a search for his own
spiritual power, might encounter a fox or a deer in a special manner; thus
he or she would adopt this spirit-being as his personal guide and path to power.
For example, amongst the Nez Perce tribe adolescent children set out alone
to find their own we-yekin or personal guardian god after staying on a hillside
in a shallow hole for a few days, without food or water. In a man's case, it
would often take the form of an animal; in a woman's case, the form would
often be that of a mountain, a valley or some natural scene. The we-yekin
appears in visions to the seeker due to the rigorous conditions of the quest
that often includes fasting and exposure. Once the spirit has been met
and the relationship cemented, then the person can return home with joy because he or she is now a full adult and member of the tribe. Often the person changes his name to indicate his or her spiritual ally: “Black Wolf” or “Chrimson Sky After Sunset” are two examples.

All the various tribes of Native Americans used myths and rituals differently, and each of them had its own social function. Some unified and organized their mythologies; others never tried to do so, but left them open and loose. All had several things in common. First, they made wide use of the natural world: animals, plants, natural landmarks, oceans, rivers and mountains, all of which had great symbolic and mythic importance. They were valued in each respective community, seen as holy and powerful, and no Indians considered these things as raw materials for their consumption. He or she borrows things from nature, uses them and returns them; for all things come from the Mother Earth and all things return to Her. An example of this is the Nez Perce “Sun Dance” that is held every year to thank nature for the harvest of salmon. Since they believe that all living things have spirits, the first victim must be treated as sacred to insure continued fertility, of which the Sun is the source. The first salmon is caught by a shaman and then carefully prepared: only a few chosen people are allowed to eat this “messenger from the Sun Goddess.” It is believed that the first salmon is the leader of the other salmon, therefore, if it is properly eaten, its spirit is transferred to all the other salmon which will then be willing to come to the hunters in large numbers.

People living in the civilized world have much to learn from Native Americans and their sense of harmony with Nature. Their ethical feelings are revealed by the fact that they treat every life with respect and apologize to Nature for killing animals or cutting plants out of necessity. The reason for such an ethical feeling lies in their strong sense of reincarnation. All things change all the time: animals change into people, old women into rocks, and
trees into spirit houses. The cycle of Nature derives from the collective spirit of which everything manifested. One lives with Nature, not apart from it because one is mythically a part of it. It logically follows that all things are alive; if that stone was a part of Thunderbird or if the Mountain sent the Storm spirits, all things encountered in nature should be respected and treated well. One can never know when a tree or river contained an especially powerful spirit; it could help or hurt one, so an attitude of reverence is encouraged.

Second, Native American mythology often related to practical things, like how to do something or how the tribe learned to create something. Many of the things explained this way actually helped further the survival of the tribe. The Great White Buffalo sacrificed himself to give life to the tribe, the rain Kachina Spirits were danced down to help the corn grow, the Wolf Spirit filled the warriors of the tribe with bravery so that they could win in battle. Though the logic of mythical identification was lost on many Europeans, it all made perfect sense to the Indians. Myths are a kind of blueprint; if one follows them and makes rituals to reenact them, one will gain a kind of power to accomplish what one needs to do. So we can see that the world of the Native American inhabitants has two most important levels: the pragmatic physical reality and the underlying spiritual, mythical reality. It was a commonly accepted fact that long ago the two were the same; later the mythic reality receded, yet it is still accessible to magical people called medicine men or shamans through rituals. This Spirit World contains a plethora of powers, spirits, gods and magical animals. The prosperity of the tribe, and sometimes the survival of individuals would depend on keeping a right relationship with all these forces. To help the people do this, some advice of certain experts, namely, tribal shamans would be necessary.
THE SHAMAN OR MEDICINE MAN

In philosophical religions, the job of a priest is to be the intermediary between God (or the laws of karma) and the worshipers. Sometimes a special spiritual knowledge is necessary, yet it is rare that occult or psychic ability is a prerequisite for the job. In fact, the job of a priest often becomes a political office whose spiritual aspect is secondary, if important at all. In any event, a priest of Islam, Christianity or Buddhism rarely has to prove his spiritual power. The opposite is true for the shaman or medicine man in Native American tribes. This person, be it a man or woman, has to go through some sort of radical initiatory experience that significantly alters his or her personality and spirituality. For example, a normal Indian hunter may suddenly become very sick and almost die. He suddenly has a series of transformative visions and awakens out of his sickness a "new man" who has forged a lasting relationship with the supernatural world. Or maybe the person was born different, always seeing or hearing things, and eventually he forges a kind of balance between reality and the unseen world that he can see or hear. Sometimes an existing shaman can help another person create this initiatory experience, be it through fasting, ritual, pain, psychoactive drugs or a combination of these. Accordingly, the spiritual lineage can be passed on or continued, which is vital to the life of a tribe. Because a tribe so dependent on fatalism without a strong shaman would be blind to the reality surrounding them. An analogy would be like a ship sailing blind without a navigator. In some ways it is easier to lose the chief (the captain of the ship) than the navigator-shaman. It is easier to replace a political leader than a spiritual one with occult powers. Shamans are, of course, not limited to Indian cultures; there are shamans all over Asia, South America, Africa and the Arctic region. All natural religious cultures highly value the power of the psychic or magical
people within their social system.

So what do these people do? They forecast weather, predict harvests and hunts, and foresee great problems and trials so that the people can prepare themselves. They divine the will of the gods or spirits concerning specific situations. In this connection shamanism is important. The shaman is a person with extraordinary insight and dream-capacity which is sometimes augmented and intensified by traditional hallucinogenic substances already mentioned. They advise the chief and elders of the tribe on political matters and their spiritual ramifications. One of the most important things that they do is heal, both physically and spiritually. They blast evil spirits and invading entities. This is often misinterpreted and reviled as primitive nonsense, however, modern shamans are quite aware of modern medicine and use it. They will explain that in the Spirit World a physical sickness can appear as a malignant spirit that can be driven off. There is a large body of evidence to prove that shamanistic healing often works. Even if the rituals and practices are only psychological, they still seem to prove very effective. It is important to remember that the relationship between the mind and the body is not well known and such things as faith healing seem to define a rational explanation.

How does the shaman or medicine man do these things? Outwardly he manipulates symbols, chants, sings and practices other rituals. What he is really using is the magic or fathomless human power that he has accumulated by various practices and by traveling, via a deep trance, into the Spirit World. Most aboriginal cultures have remarkably consistent descriptions of the Spirit World. They agree that it is the “true” reality, that it is identified as the realm of dreams (but the shaman enters this world consciously), and that it is filled with mythical entities and symbolic things. The shaman is well-trusted by his community and tends to lead the spiritual life of the tribe. If he loses that confidence and his power or abuses it, he will lose his position very quickly and often his life as well.
RITUALS

There are generally four kinds of rituals in Native American tribes: personal rituals of power, personal rituals as part of a secret society, certain rituals for specific situations and rituals to gain prosperity for the whole tribe.

The first personal ritual of power that most Indians are involved with is some sort of initiation. This is a powerful rite that somehow simulates the death of the initiate and his or her rebirth as a "new" person who is then welcomed as an adult and member of the tribe in full. This is often done in connection with a secret transmission of the tribe's inner secrets, myths and symbols, and the giving of a new name. It is not uncommon for the person to be considered a new person, his childhood-self being dead. After this rebirth, the person is now totally responsible as a tribe member, he or she has a whole new set of duties and must obey the laws and taboos or else suffer punishment, a far cry from the easy life of children. The ritual of initiation may be individual, like the Vision Quest where a youth is sent into the wilderness with certain spiritual instructions to find his or her power, or it may be done in the context of a group. Sometimes it entails fasting, pain and so on, just like shamanistic initiatory practices. Almost always there is some sort of shock that is designed to "reprogram" the initiate and change him or her. It is the time when they encounter the Spirit World first-hand and meet those gods, spirits and powers that are most important to the tribe. Tribal initiation is usually done at puberty, and afterwards the new adults are expected to begin thinking about marriage and contributing to the tribe.

Later, as an adult, a tribe member often also has the opportunity of being initiated into one of several societies within the tribe, each with its own practices, powers, rituals and, very often, dances and chants. Many times these societies are connected with occupations. There may be a warriors
society, a healers society, an artisans society, etc. which may be grouped around sub-clans, spiritual affinities, or location. Women often have their own societies and, in some cases, there are societies that overlap. There are usually special times each year (tribal ritual times), when all the societies display their dances, invoke their spirits and powers, and function together within the larger body of the tribe. For example, in the Hopi Society of Northern Arizona, males are initiated into the four main ritual societies and the females into the women’s society. There is also a more exclusive men’s society which organizes and oversees the highly complicated and important winter ceremonies at the time of the solstice. This is the time when the direction of the Sun needs to be changed while plants, animals and all life need to be ritually renewed and reintegrated into the general cosmic harmony.

This leads us to group rituals. These festivals may be held at special times to commemorate seasonal events (spring and vernal equinox and the solstices, for example) or may celebrate a special spiritual time. For example, the big time of power in the Pacific Northwest is the winter ceremonial. This is the period of time after the salmon harvest when the chinook or winter rain winds begin to blow. Mythically this is seen as the arrival of the most powerful spirit flying out of the west and it marks the time when all the powers are at their peak. During the next three months there are mass initiations, constant dance-rituals, the ceremonial meeting of tribes in massive feasts called Potlatch and a number of public and private spiritual rituals. Almost all tribes have a special time like this when the entire tribe becomes deeply involved in the spiritual evolution and purification of the society as a whole.

At many sacred ritual times there are often offerings to the spirits or gods. Natural substances, dances and songs may all be appropriate gifts to the powers of nature, and the people may expect rainfalls, bountiful crops and protection from evil in exchange.

There are also special rituals that are only performed at special times.
When someone is sick, a special rite may be performed by the shaman or the family. When a person dies a number of rituals must be performed. When the hunt is successful (be it a deer, bear or whatever) there are a number of small rituals that must be observed. During her menses, a woman must often perform certain actions and rituals. At certain points of a child’s life different rituals must be performed. Most of these rituals, except those of sickness, birth and death, are not so solemn or intense. They are usually simple and are a part of the flow of every-day life.

**LAWS AND TABOOS**

Just as every culture has its ethical and religious laws and taboos, so do Native American tribes. The spiritual laws or taboos are to maintain social order and prevent spiritual pollution. For example, women experiencing menses may be segregated or may have special restrictions upon their actions. Men who have killed in battle often have similar restrictions put on them until they have been spiritually purified. Nothing is killed or taken from nature without appropriate deference paid, otherwise, corrective actions must be taken ritually or sickness may be the result. Many social relationships and interactions have taboos governing them. These often differ from tribe to tribe, yet some basic things are almost always covered: marriage, sex, killing, eating, warfare, sickness, trading, natural bodily functions, everything associated with birth and death, sacred places and objects, the telling of sacred myths or secrets, and generally any interactions with nature. These taboos, it should be stressed, are not divine laws sent by an all-powerful god. They are considered pragmatic, common sense and simply part of one’s relationship with other people and with the Spirit World. One is not punished for breaking a taboo by God but by an offended entity, be it the tribe or a spirit-power. We are again confronted with the Native American view of inseparable
relationship between religion and nature.

We hope that this gives a brief but thought-provoking introduction to Native American religions and how they function in the wider context of the tribe. It is tragic that these great people have been systematically decimated and their complex and creative religious and cultural traditions have been destroyed to a great extent. It is our hope that many of these surviving traditions and the peoples who practice them can be saved.