CHAPTER 1

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN LIVING RELIGIONS

The following treatment of elements of American Indian living religions must be both cursory and selective. Even where emphasis is to be upon the present living reality and viability of religious elements, account must be taken of at least the following three major interrelated factors.

First, American Indian religions represent preeminent examples of primal religious traditions that have been present in the Americas for some thirty to sixty thousand years. Fundamental elements common to the primal nature of those traditions not only survive into the present among Indian cultures of the Americas, but in many cases are currently being reexamined and reaffirmed by the people with increasing and remarkable vigor.

Second, out of this heritage of primal qualities there has developed, through time and in accord with the great geographical diversity of the Americas, a rich plurality of highly differentiated types of religious traditions, making it impossible to define or describe American Indian religions in generalities.

Third, ever-increasing contacts since the late fifteenth century with representatives of diverse civilizations and cultures of Europe and Euro-Americans led to a vast spectrum of change within and across indigenous Indian cultures. Under this impact certain tribal groups and even linguistic families became extinct, while others became acculturated to varying degrees into the dominant societies.

Most surviving groups, however, have shown through history a remarkable ability for coping with change and cultural deprivation by adapting and borrowing from the non-Indian world with pragmatic yet cautious selectivity, making it possible not just to survive but to retain at least core elements of ancient and well-tried religions and traditional ways of being. The "new" religious movements of revitalization or reformulation, in response to deprivation and continuing pressures for acculturation, should therefore be understood in terms of a continuity of traditional elements rather than as innovations unrelated to the

peoples' own religious and cultural history. The impact of Christianity and the special meaning of "conversion" to the American Indian should also be understood in this larger context.

THE PRIMAL FOUNDATIONS

Those primal elements that are universal and fundamental to virtually all North American Indian religious traditions of past or present include the following general qualities or traits.

1. That which we refer to in current usage as "religion" cannot be conceived as being separable from any of the multiple aspects of any American Indian culture. In no American Indian language is there any single word or term that could translate as "religion," as there is no single term for what we refer to as "art." To stress this distinctive phenomenon it is preferable to use a term such as "traditions," or perhaps, for greater clarity, "religious traditions," when referring to religion among American Indians or indeed among any primal peoples.

2. Within primal or "primitive" cultures the people's understanding of their language involves at least the following elements. Words have a special potency or force that is integral to their specific sounds: What is named is therefore understood to be really present in the name in unitary manner, not as "symbol" with dualistic implication, as is generally the case with modern languages. An aspect of the sacred potency latent in words in primal tradition is the presiding understanding that words in their sounds are born in the breath of the being from whom they proceed, and since breath in these traditions is universally identified with the life principle, words are thus sacred and must be used with care and responsibility. Such quality of the spoken word is further enhanced by the understood close proximity of the source of breath, the lungs, with the heart, which is associated with the being's spiritual center.

Just as words bear power, the full statement, or even an unspoken thought, is understood to have a compulsive potency of its own, especially when the utterance is in a ritual or ceremonial context. Recitation of a myth of creation, for example, is understood to be an actual, not a symbolic, recapitulation or reenactment of that primordial creative process or event, which is not bound by time.[1]

[1] Perhaps the most attention that has been given to these primal qualities of language, including that equally or more important paralanguage of silence, is in the studies of Dennis and Barbara Tedlock (see chapter 10, footnote 2), who have drawn their examples primarily from the Zunis of the American Southwest.

3. A similar mode of understanding, paralleling that of language, is found in the way American Indian peoples perceive what we call their arts and crafts. The natural materials used in the creative activity manifest sacred powers in accord with their particular nature and place of origin; and the completed form itself, or what is externally "represented," is seen to manifest its own sacred potency, but again, not in the dual manner or process by which we translate a "symbol." Such immediate quality of experience is essential to an outsider's understanding of the rich legacy of American Indian art forms, and is also a key to the realization that here there can be no sharp dichotomy as obtains between our categories of the "arts" as distinct from the "crafts."

4. Further primal concepts pervasive and basic to American Indian traditions are found in the experience of time and process, which are universally understood not in the Western linear manner, but in terms of the circle—that is, cyclical and reciprocal. The seasons of nature, the span of a life, human or non-human, are understood in a cyclical manner and are reexpressed formally in architectural styles reflecting the cosmos and through a rich variety of ritual or ceremonial forms and acts.

5. A presiding characteristic of primal people is a special quality and intensity of interrelationship with the forms and forces of their natural environment. As nomadic hunters or gatherers, or as agriculturists, dependence upon natural resources demanded detailed knowledge of all aspects of their immediate habitat. This accumulated pragmatic lore was, however, always interrelated with a sacred lore; together these could be said to constitute a metaphysic of nature. It is therefore possible to speak of subsistence activities in terms of sacred modes of hunting and fishing, or to define in great detail rich cosmological lore latent in agricultural pursuits. American Indian peoples are today giving new attention to the wisdom of these traditions, and such reevaluation is having a strong impact upon certain non-Indian groups who are concerned with environmental degradation within the industrialized societies.

Out of the foundations of these still-lived primal elements, there developed in the Americas through time and across space specific traditions of great diversity. The migrations over successive time periods, the diversity of physical types, a thousand or more tribal groups with several hundred mutually unintelligible languages for North America alone, and all with the contrasts of American geography and climatic zones to which the peoples adapted, present complexities and ques-

tions that still evade scholars. Full descriptions and formulations of typologies within the subtle and sensitive area of native religious traditions is a work still to be accomplished, and is further complicated by historical overlays of Euro-American presences and their introduction, with proselytizing zeal and quasi-divine mandate, of new religio-cultural elements. The appended map of "culture areas" (see p. 98) will express and perhaps clarify some elements of this grand complexity.

In response to increasing evidence of this cultural plurality, the concept of Native American "culture areas" was conceived and developed at the turn of the century by Clark Wissler. This is a concept that necessarily oversimplifies and raises problems, such as its static perspective and the cultural identity of people where areas converge and overlap. Yet the device is deemed useful here as a means for organizing descriptive materials and for employing certain generalizations within circumscribed limits. The five culture areas that have been selected for summary description both represent a cross-section of North American indigenous peoples and provide examples of religious traditions as related to contrasting subsistence patterns.

The general primal qualities already outlined, with the more specific traits to be described, may be said to constitute *living* religions in the sense that core elements of sacred lore, values, and the native language are held and lived today by at least certain segments of the populations, and it is through the leaders of these groups that movements for preservation and revitalization are appearing with increasing frequency. Analysis of the impact and meaning of Christianity and conversion among American Indian groups will be presented in the concluding part of this chapter.

THE ARCTIC ESKIMO

The Eskimo of the arctic coast, whose religious traits are representative of a larger circumpolar region, are often excluded from descriptions of the more southern Indians. Such exclusion is arbitrary, since evidence suggests that many core arctic and closely related subarctic religious themes diffused southward, where, with certain modifications and additions, they survive today in the lives of eastern woodland Algonquin hunting peoples, among the Athabascans of the western subarctic, and even among the peoples of the Plains and Prairie cultural area.

The Eskimo experience their world of barren coast and expanse of sea and ice as peopled with a vast host of spirit beings whose differentiated qualities and associated powers are specific to each form and force

of the natural environment. There are also spirits, no less real, which are of realms unrelated to forms of the phenomenal world. Graphic depiction of such spirit realities is expressed by the people in abundance, as executed in the ancient tradition of stone carvings or through contemporary innovative lithographs, as produced, for example, by the peoples of the Cape Dorset Cooperatives. Precarious subsistence dependency upon sea mammals, or land animals in season, is interrelated with beliefs in a soul or plurality of souls specific to all human and nonhuman living beings. In slaying animals of the sea or land, the hunter thus bears grave responsibility for releasing souls (*anua*) of living beings; rites and ceremonies must therefore be observed in relation to all aspects of hunting. The Eskimo indeed hold that the greatest danger in their lives is not the cold or constant threat of starvation, but the presiding reality that their existence is dependent upon the taking of life from other beings. In a world where such precarious balance obtains between life and death, or where such a thin line divides physical appearances from the subtle realm of spirits, it is understandable that there must be specific structures and mechanisms by which equilibrium can be maintained.

Equilibrium within families and larger social groups depends upon observing a host of taboos specific to every necessary activity and social interrelationship. Where codes of such appropriate behavior are broken, or where the attitudes of the hunter are not respectful toward the game, it is believed that the animals will not present themselves willingly as a sacrificial offering to the hunter.

These traditions of the coastal arctic peoples are expressed and supported by beliefs in an all-powerful goddess, half human and half fish, called Sedna or Takanaluk, who dwells in a great cave or pool under the sea wherein she keeps all the sea mammals, which she will release or withhold according to the degree to which the people observe or break the taboos. In parallel manner, there are Masters or Keepers of the various species of land animals, who will release or withhold their kind according to the behavior and attitudes of the hunter and the hunter's people. These beliefs suggest the presence of an abstract and unifying concept, since the multiplicity of spirits and souls of all sea life coalesce into a kind of unity in the single underwater Sea Power, as in similar manner the spirits of land animals are unified under the single great Master or Keeper. Although it is not possible to affirm for the Eskimo an even more ultimate concept of a High God responsible for all life, as is found in most Indian tribes to the south, there nevertheless is occasional reference to a unity of all living beings of sea and

land in the figure of the Great Meat Dish. If such seemingly more ultimate and unitary concept may not be central to Eskimo experience, it could well be due to the fact that human survival here necessitates presiding attention to the immediate and specific elements of a harsh and precarious environment.

In this arctic world of uncertainties, the central and all-important religious practitioner is the *angákut*, or shaman, which is the customary Siberian Tungusic term. This shaman helps the people maintain the necessary delicate balance between this world of pragmatic necessities and the more subtle, but no less real world of spirits, souls, and gradated powers. The shaman is an intermediary between these multiple worlds, who can communicate, interpret, and indeed travel in mysterious flight through the worlds of Eskimo realities. The shaman's wisdom and special powers are critical to communal life and human survival. Through the shaman's familiarity with the spirit realms and through his ability to send out in ecstatic trance one of his souls, often called the "free soul," on a spiritual journey and quest, he is able to discern who among the people has broken the taboos causing the disappearance of the game. He is able to placate Sedna under the sea, or discover the cause of illness perhaps associated with "soul loss," or he may foretell future weather conditions and thus the appropriate time for travel.

Methods of becoming a shaman are common to many Indian groups of the Americas. The apprentice must have a guide who has traveled and knows the way. Among many disciplines, he must learn from his instructor how to divest himself, in sacred and mysterious manner, of the outer layers of his own flesh, and then to name all the bones of his skeleton. In such magical lore is clarified the deep meanings underlying widespread traditions of shamanic art forms found throughout the arctic and Indian Americas, wherein the outer covering of beings is understood and presented as transparent, a kind of x-ray vision that focuses on depicted inner or vital realities understood in a spiritual manner. To gain the shamanic lore, the apprentice must also participate in a retreat where, through the secrets of solitude and in suffering through fasting and exposure to cold, he will receive, if he is worthy, specific sacred powers through the vision appearance and the teachings of a helping spirit.

The novice shaman must then observe special taboos and requirements when he returns to his people, whom he is now able to lead through the delicate balance of life and death as an intermediary for the subtle forces of the spirit worlds. Demonstration of the powers

received is required in periodic communal gatherings where, with the aid of the powerful rhythms of drum and voice, and with a rich array of dramatic props and techniques, the shaman enters into ecstatic trance, during which his soul travels to find and return with the needed knowledge. His success or failure as a shaman is established for the people in accord with the pragmatic or spiritual results obtained. Such practices and shamanic lore confirm for the people the realities of the worlds of spirits and souls, afford release from personal and communal tensions, and define order and structures critical to stability and continuity of the family and larger society in a harsh and precarious environment.

THE EASTERN SUBARCTIC

Religious elements central to the arctic peoples are recapitulated, with certain variations and additions, in the lives of the northern Algonquin hunters who adapted to conditions of the boreal regions of the subarctic. In spite of changes wrought by a long history of contact with Euro-American hunters, trappers, traders, and Christian missionaries, the hunting activities of these people are still imbued with sacred beliefs and accompanying rites similar in most respects to those of the arctic. Here, however, are found rich mythologies of creation with an anthropomorphic Creator figure who is found upon the primordial waters, accompanied by already present aquatic diving birds and animals, and who brings to the surface of the waters the primal mud from which the earth is fashioned. This mythic theme instructs, among many other things, that creation is not just an event of time past but is an ever-continuing process in which all elements of creation participate now as always.

Also, there are tales of ambivalent Trickster hero figures who bring desirable things to the people while defining through their unacceptable acts the parameters of acceptable behavior. The conical-frame wigwam type of dwelling is conceived by the people as a recreated image of the cosmos, or of the human being as a microcosm, as is also reflected in the dome-shaped "sweat lodge." In such lodges the regenerative forces of earth, air, fire, and water are used in combination for restoring a man's original purity, which may be lost through the breaking of innumerable hunting taboos or through contact with the ritual impurity associated with the menstrual cycles of women. The smoking pipes and tobacco used in this area carry eminently sacred and sacramental meanings. Although it is true that tobacco smoking is found on the arctic coast, evidence suggests that its origin is from the west, from

Russia through Siberia, which explains the absence of sacred elements associated with smoking among the Eskimo.

The religious practitioners of the western and eastern subarctic represent a modification of the classic shamanism of the arctic and Siberia, for here the shaman does not send out in ecstatic trance one of his souls to accomplish a mission; rather, in dramatic ceremony within the lodge, and with the use of the drum and offerings, he conjures *in* to himself his spirit helpers, whom he had experienced in the course of a vision quest. These spirits demonstrate their presence by mysteriously tapping and shaking the lodge, at times accompanied by mysterious sounds. The spirits, who are sometimes the practitioner's guardian spirits, are then instructed to seek out and bring back what is desired of them.

As is appropriate to a people whose lives are dependent upon the hunting and trapping of large and small game, there obtains rich and sacred lore relating to all the animals in their world of experience. Special qualities are specific to each species of animal, and these qualities can be communicated to the people. Animals are thus considered as teachers and, in a sense, are therefore superior to humans. Due to such beliefs the people have secret societies of animal lodges, which often are ranked in accordance with the powers specific to the particular animal. The bear, for example, is considered to be of the greatest power, thus complex rites and ceremonies are found in the hunting, slaying, and final sacramental treatment of this animal, especially concerning the appropriate and respectful disposal of the bones and skull. The key Algonquin term that refers to sacred power as used here is *manitu*, with *Kitchi Manitou* being the totality of all such powers. It is suggested by certain scholars that the latter term, which suggests an overall unitary principle, originated with the coming of Christianity; yet it is also highly probable, as much evidence suggests, that this concept was understood prior to the advent of Euro-Americans.

THE EASTERN WOODLANDS

Moving southward from the coastal arctic to the subarctic and into the eastern woodlands, there is a cumulative continuity of core religious themes, their ritual and ceremonial expressions increasingly complex as climate and habitat become more favorable. Such complexity is well illustrated by the Medewewin medicine dance, or the Medicine Lodge Society of the Ojibwa-Chippewa of the Great Lakes region. These ceremonies normally occur semi-annually in late spring and early fall. Candidates seek initiation into the sacred society for a variety

of reasons, but most often they have had dream or vision experiences in retreats that indicate they should seek admission. Such persons are then instructed by the *mide* priests in the sacred lore, songs, and other requirements for entry.

The Medewewin rites are conducted within a long lodge conceived as an image of the universe. Purification in a sweat lodge is required prior to participation in the ceremonies. Within the lodge, and guarding the doorways, are certain forms identified with animal-spirit helpers and guardians. The rites may last from two to eight days, depending on the degrees the candidates are entering. The first of these cumulative degrees is associated with aquatic animals referred to in myths of creation: the mink, otter, muskrat, or beaver. The second degree is associated with the beings of the air, an owl or a hawk, and the third degree with more powerful beings of the earth such as the serpent or wildcat. The fourth and ultimate degree, which may be achieved in older age and which demands much time, preparation, and expense, is represented by the most powerful land animal, the bear. Within the lodge myths are recited by the priests or medicine men that tell of creation and sacred migration, such recitations usually supported by incised birch-bark scrolls, which act as a mnemonic aid. The ceremonies come to a dramatic climax when the candidates are ritually "shot" by the priests, using an otterskin bag out of which the sacred *mi'gis* or cowrie shell is magically propelled into the candidate, who drops to the ground experiencing a spiritual death. In being brought back to life by the priest, the candidate is understood to be reborn into a new world of deeper spiritual understanding.

Although these Algonquin peoples have had intense contacts over many centuries with Euro-American peoples and cultures, and have experienced loss of lands, new types of subsistence economies, the introduction of Christianity, and most recently the new syncretistic Peyote religion of the Native American Church, rites such as those of the Medewewin are not only still observed, but there is evidence of increasing participation. Such renewed affirmation of traditional religious elements may in part be explained by the new pan-Indian movements, which so facilitate intertribal exchange that other centers of traditional renewal, as found for example in the Plains, provide example and stimulus to tribal groups of distant areas.

The dominant Iroquoian-speaking peoples of a still more favorable eastern woodland environment represent even greater cultural complexity in their dual subsistence patterns of horticulture, probably of southeastern origin, and seasonal hunting. Their wise and well-known

sociopolitical league organization of the six nations, although somewhat changed and modified, is still intact and operative today in its basic structure, as is the case with many of the traditional Iroquoian religious expressions that endure beneath the obvious external evidence of change.

Iroquoian religion gives ultimate attention to a supreme and unitary principle which, although claimed by many to be of Christian origin, nevertheless seems to be integral from the earliest times to a host of core indigenous Iroquoian expressions and general world view. Their term *Orenda*, which defines an extension of spiritual power(s), is a concept which, although expressed in different languages, is widespread across American Indian cultures. Such an abstract concept is basic to Iroquoian cosmologies, which define dualisms of heaven and earth, but which understand them to be necessary reciprocal forces that are ultimately inherent in a unitary principle. The structure of the Iroquoian longhouses expresses these cosmological values, and it is in such houses that the people to this day enact cycles of complex four-day dance-drama ceremonies, often of thanksgiving, acknowledging and celebrating the gifts of life in the form of foods both wild and cultivated.

The Iroquoian carved masks of the False Face curing societies speak of the spirit forces of the woodlands, their powers intensified by the requirement that the marks be carved out of a standing living tree. The Iroquois have rites of purification, and youths are expected at puberty to engage in the vision quest, often to seek out a personal guardian spirit, which is usually associated with the person's new and sacred name. With the disruption of much of Iroquoian culture under an intensity of Euro-American contact and pressures for change, there appeared in the 1800s the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake, whom the people prefer to call the Life Bringer, who brought a messianic message with strict codes of conduct. As with the messianic movement of the 1890 Ghost Dance, or the Peyote cult that became incorporated as the Native American Church in 1918, the code of the Iroquois Life Bringer integrated traditional indigenous elements with selected Christian ethics and beliefs. It is in terms of such synthetic reformulations that members of the Iroquois league live their religions today.

THE PLAINS AND PRAIRIE

Native American groups living today in the Plains and Prairie area represent very diverse cultural histories, with tribal origins tracing back to the hunting cultures of the Athabascan Mackenzie subarctic, the

eastern Algonquin woodlands, and the early agricultural traditions of the Southeast, as well as to certain groups of Uto-Aztecan gathering and hunting peoples from the Great Basin area. Given this great diversity of origins, languages, and cultures, it is difficult to understand in what sense this geographic zone may be said to constitute a single culture area with distinctive religious traditions. Yet over many centuries, with common adjustments to a unique Plains and Prairie grasslands environment supporting millions of bison, and with the advent of the horse in the 1800s leading to greater mobility and intensification of intertribal contacts, the diverse groups developed a style of life and thought expressing a commonality of religio-cultural traits. This cultural history presents a remarkable example of adaptability and selective borrowings that has continued into the present day even in confrontations with new elements and forces for change from Euro-American societies. It is this facility for adaptation that has allowed the people to survive with a distinctive Plains style and quality of core religious and ceremonial elements.

The Plains people define and experience a multitude of differentiated spirit beings or sacred powers, which (a) are specific to each form and element of the natural world; (b) are associated with vital force or an animating life principle; and (c) possess subtle qualities understood to be transferable to other beings or even to "inanimate" forms. It should be noted that in the people's experience no hard dichotomy obtains between the Western categories of "animate" and "inanimate," since to them all phenomena are animate in some manner. The sacred quality of powers is denoted by terms such as the Dakota *wakan*, which is not a noun with the implication of limit, but an adjective conveying a sense of mystery or the mysterious. This multiplicity of sacred mysteries tends to coalesce into an ultimate unity expressed through polysynthetic terms such as the Lakota *Wakan-Tanka*, "Great Mysterious," similar to *Wakonda* among the Omaha and Osage. The often-used translation "Great Spirit" employs a noun, and is undoubtedly the result of a Christian perspective that changes the original sense of the term.

Almost all Plains tribal groups stress the importance of individual participation in a ritualized "vision quest," or less frequently a quest to receive one's personal guardian spirit, both forms being accomplished in solitary retreat with fasting and sacrifice. Sacred powers appearing in such experiences are usually associated with animal beings or with other natural phenomena, and they may indicate the seeker's sacred name, may constitute the origin and validation of sacred songs and

forms of art, or may be the origin of a new tribal rite or ceremony. The nature of the received vision often obligates the recipient to externalize the experience and thus to share the power with the larger community through use of art representations or an actual reenactment of the experience through new forms of dance-drama. The obligation for all individuals to participate in a vision quest is so pervasive that Robert Lowie was led to term the trait "democratized shamanism."

The classical dwelling of Plains peoples is the portable conical tipi, which expresses cosmological and metaphysical meanings and is therefore still used for ceremonial occasions or for general communal gatherings such as the summer "powwows." The shelter is understood as the universe, or microcosmically as a human person. The central open fire is the presence of the Great Mysterious, which is at the center of all existence, and the smoke hole at the top of the tipi is the place and path of liberation. Similar understandings are specific to the small dome-shaped sweat lodge wherein, as with the eastern subarctic peoples, purification rites are required as preparation for sacred ceremonies, or before any important undertaking. Even though today most Plains people live in permanent frame houses, the purification lodges are usually found nearby.

The Sun Dance, also called Medicine Dance or Thirst Lodge, is an annual springtime world- or self-renewal ceremony of great complexity, which today has been particularly instrumental in the preservation and revitalization of many traditional religious elements. The large, circular open frame lodge is ritually constructed in imitation of the world's creation, with the sacred cottonwood tree at the center as the axis linking sky and earth. Those who have previously made the vow participate in the sacrificial dance-fast in the lodge for three to four days, dancing all day and most of the night with the powerful support of large drums and heroic songs. They move from the circumference to the tree at the center and back again, always facing and concentrating upon the tree at the center, or upon one of the sacred objects attached to the tree—an eagle or bison head or skull. Some groups, such as the Lakota, periodically move within the lodge in such a manner that the dancers are always gazing toward the sun, which is associated with the source of life. Some dancers make specific vows to pierce the muscles of their chests. Into these cuts are attached thongs that have been tied to a high point in the tree, so that the dancer is now virtually tied to the center and must dance until the flesh breaks loose. Through the rigors and sacrificial elements of these rites the individual participants often receive powers through vision experiences, and the larger com-

munity gathered in support of the dancers participates in the sacred powers thus generated.

The sacred tobacco pipes of the Plains peoples express in comprehensive synthetic manner all that is most sacred to the people. Such pipes are used on all ritual and important occasions, and any agreement or relationship sealed with the smoking of a pipe is held inviolate. Such pipes have sacred origins defined in rich mythologies, and there are pervasive beliefs, held to this day, that if ever the pipes are no longer used or respected the people will lose their center and will cease to be a people. The pipes, which have long wooden stems and stone bowls, are understood to be an axis joining and defining a path between heaven and earth. Microcosmically the pipe is identified with human beings, the stem being the breath passage leading to the bowl, which is the spiritual center or heart. In solemn prayer, as each grain of carefully prepared tobacco is placed in the pipe, mention is made of some aspect of creation, so that when the bowl is full it contains the totality of time, space, and all of creation including humankind. When the fire consumes this consecrated tobacco with the aid of human breath, there is affirmed the absorption, or identity, of all creation with the fire, which is the presence of the ultimate Great Mysterious. Often, in concluding the rite the participants in the communal smoking recite, "We are all related." Today certain Christian priests, realizing the profound meanings of the pipe, are attempting to integrate the rites within the context of celebration of Holy Communion. On the other hand, many of the younger traditional Indians have ambivalent feelings about such practices.

Religious practitioners in the Plains are often termed "medicine men" or "medicine women," for they are the ones who know the lore of curative herbs, a knowledge partly transferred but validated and added to through sacred lore received in the vision quest. There are also those who have received especially sacred powers and helpers through vision or dream experiences and are thereby qualified to guide others in the means to seek experience of the sacred. Both functions are often possessed by one person.

This type of person and function is somewhat different from the classical arctic shaman, for here the practitioner does not send out his or her "free soul" in a trance state to accomplish missions, but rather in dramatic ceremony the spirit helpers are called in and then sent out to discover the cause of illness, to find lost objects, or to provide an answer to some spiritual question. The contemporary *Yuwipi* ceremonies, now very popular among the Sioux, provide good examples of

such a type of practitioner and the use of what may be called ceremonial magic.

Purification rites, vision quests, Sun Dances, rituals of the pipe, and other ceremonies of a traditional nature are being increasingly practiced by Plains peoples today, with positions of leadership being assumed by younger tribal members. Affirmation of certain traditional values is also being expressed in new contexts and through such means as the summer "powwow" circuit, offering a type of nomadism with intertribal pan-Indian emphasis. Even the once militant American Indian Movement, which used religious themes to support protest activities, is now minimizing militant protest in favor of sincere relearning and reliving the traditional religious ways in which more ultimate and lasting answers to problems and questions of identity are found. Statistics are not available, but significant evidence from Plains areas strongly suggests that the once rapidly expanding ceremonial use of peyote in the syncretistic Native American Church is now being superseded by the more satisfying and lasting realities found in the roots of the people's own indigenous traditional lore, which, moreover, is carried by their own languages.

THE SOUTHWEST

Due to rich cultural and linguistic diversity the American southwest as a cultural area is so complex that it is only possible to treat here in summary manner two dominant groups, the Pueblos and Navajo, or *Dimwe* (the people), as they prefer to be called.

The roots of the sedentary Pueblo cultures in the southwest reach back to both the Paleo-Indian big game hunters of approximately 10,000 B.C. and to the expansive Desert Culture of ±3000 B.C. with its evidence of incipient agriculture. Since these ancient times, the peoples have developed rich and complex cultures identified with specific regions and experienced a number of migrations before being located at their present sites along the Rio Grande in the east and extending to the Arizona mesas of the Hopi in the west.

The very distinct Athabascan (*Na Diné*)-speaking Navajo appeared in the southwest as recently as A.D. 1200-1400, having migrated south from their homelands in the Yukon-Mackenzie subarctic area. In the interrelationships between the Navajo and Pueblo peoples, and in the encounter of both groups with the later Spanish and Euro-American domination, they have each been able to retain into the present day their own unique identities. Remarkable examples are here found not only of cultural persistence throughout adaptation and change, but

also of the enduring viability of the Navajo, whose original population in 1868 was approximately eight thousand; fifty thousand in 1950; eighty-five thousand in 1961; and at least one hundred and seventy-five thousand at present.

The Pueblos

It could be assumed that the Pueblos, as sedentary agricultural village people, would be especially vulnerable to those successive outside pressures for change on the part of the Spanish explorers and military, the Christian missionaries, and the detraditionalizing policies of the American government agencies. And yet through time and bitter experience the communities learned the wisdom of appearing to acquiesce while holding in secret to their own traditional beliefs and sacred rites and ceremonies. The profound and all-encompassing nature of these traditions, borne by languages the oppressors did not understand, explains the remarkable continuity and viability of the Pueblo peoples into the present day.

Although each of the many Pueblo communities holds to its own distinctive ways of belief and action, it is nevertheless possible to suggest certain generalizations if the differences are understood to be dialects of a commonly shared cosmological and spiritual language. The Pueblo cosmos is defined through mythic narrations expressing a varying number of spheres pierced through by a hollow vertical axis. Among the Zuni these spheres are described as seven in number. Commencing with the realm of A'wonawil'ona, understood as a supreme life-giving bisexual power, other spheres are identified in turn with the Sun Father, who gives light and warmth, and the Moon Mother, who gives light at night, divides the year into months, and expresses the life cycle of living beings. The central terrestrial fourth realm is of the Earth Mother, the provider of all vegetation. The fifth subterrestrial realm is associated with the gods of war, the twin culture heroes, and the sacred Corn Mother. The gods of the sixth realm are represented by persons wearing masks (the *koko*), who appear in the seasonal dance-drama, and the seventh realm is identified with the zoic gods.

Mythic accounts of the coming into being of human persons and animals in the terrestrial realm commence with descriptions of a dark underworld, an eminently sacred realm of undeveloped possibility. In the process of emerging into the terrestrial realm, amorphous "human" beings are led by solar heroes and are also aided by animal beings who explore in turn each sphere to the four horizontal cardinal directions. The actual process of vertical emergence is aided by four types

of sacred trees identified with each of the four directions and upon which the beings climb upward to emerge into this world of limit and hardness but illuminated by the light of the sun.

It is through the full context of these myths, periodically retold in dramatic manner, that everything of importance for the people of this present terrestrial realm is defined: the heavenly elements of sun and moon, the four directions of horizontal space with their specific colors and identifying mountain ranges, the meanings associated with categories of trees, and the rich lore specific to each of the animals and birds, which is central to the structure and values of the people's many secret societies.

The Pueblo cosmos may be defined in terms of the duality of sacred worlds below in distinction to the more profane world into which the peoples emerged—comparatively a realm of hardness, limit, and restricted possibility. Among the Tewa peoples this dualism is defined through terms such as *ochu* (green, unripe, eminently sacred) in distinction to *seht'a* (cooked, ripe, or hardened); social categories, with their supernatural or posthumous counterparts, are defined and supported by such formulations. Thus it is clear why the most sacred places within the Pueblos are the *kivas*, or underground ceremonial chambers, at the bottom of which is a hollow shaft, the *sipapu*, leading underground and understood to be the very place of emergence, the Center of centers, and the underworld connection to the shrines located in the sacred mountains of the four directions. Within these *kivas*, present in varying numbers within each Pueblo, preparations take place for ceremonial rites and the dance-dramas of the masked deities that are enacted in accord with a carefully observed ceremonial calendar based on the seasons marked by the dualities of summer and winter solstices. The strict observance of the ceremonial cycle is controlled by a priest of a specific clan, who observes the annual movements of the sun. Access to the underground *kiva* is through a vertical ladder, so that descent and ascent recapitulates for the person the mythic process of emergence; it is also the way of access back to the sacred realm. The dance-dramas, which are prepared by the men in the *kivas*, are enacted in the appropriate season in the open village plazas; this periodic return of the deities reestablishes contact with the realm of the sacred.

Without the seasonal enactment of these rites and ceremonies it is believed that recycling of the sacred world- and life-sustaining powers will cease, the world will die, and the people will be no more. The pervasive force of such ritually enacted beliefs inhibits acculturation

into the non-Pueblo world of other and predominantly secular values. The comprehensive nature of beliefs integrated into the totality of life-ways makes unattractive and unnecessary the taking on of new religious elements or movements from the non-Pueblo outside world. The Native American Church and the multiple Christian denominations have therefore made little inroad into Pueblo life.

The Navajo

As northern intruders into a southwestern area of enormous cultural complexity, it is understandable that many threads of present-day Navajo culture represent a complex of elements borrowed from the Pueblos, the Spanish, the Spanish-Americans, and the ever-changing presence of the American non-Indian world. The impact of these influences is intensified by the structured presence of increasing numbers of Christian missions of all denominations, by the endless stream of "civilizing" educational policies and various agents of the U. S. government, and by new religious movements such as the Native American Church. Yet in spite of obvious changes within ancient Athabascan life-ways resulting from these contacts and pressures, studies such as that of Evan Vogt[2] suggest that these multiple innovative elements, with the exception of certain Pueblo traits, have not become fused in an integrative manner into Navajo culture and world view or compartmentalized—as was the Pueblo response to pressures for change—but have been sequentially *incorporated* around a central structural framework that was and remains to this day distinctly Navajo. The essence of this persistent structure is identified with elements of a basic Athabascan heritage of material and non-material elements reinterpreted through creative adaptations drawn from Pueblo cosmologies and ceremonial expressions.

Central to the Navajo view of the world and reality is the understanding that the human personality is a whole with every facet interrelated both within itself and in relationship to the totality of phenomena seen and unseen. Within this interrelated totality everything exists in two parts, the good and bad, the positive and negative, or the elements of male and female; they complement each other and belong together. Normally these elements are balanced, harmonious, ordered, and thus beautiful. This ideal equilibrium, however, is precarious and may be put out of balance through an indefinite number of possible

[2] E. H. Spicer, ed., *Navajo: Perspectives in American Culture Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 278-336.

factors that must be avoided: doing anything to excess, the violation of taboos, contamination through contact with the ghosts of the dead, harboring evil thoughts, initiating or being the victim of acts of witchcraft, or any disrespect or carelessness in one's relationships with the forms and forces of a natural world that normally is in a state of balance and harmony.

Symptoms of any illness whatsoever are indications that the normal balance and harmony has been upset, and therefore must be restored. Such restoration of health for the Navajo person necessitates participation in one of several hundred ceremonial "chantways" of from two to nine or even fourteen days' duration. The chantway specific to the illness is determined by a special quasi-shaman diagnostician or "hand trembler." A singer (*hatali*) who knows the particular selected chantway is then contacted, and elaborate preparations are commenced. Sacred ceremonies must always be enacted within a *hogan*, the traditional Navajo circular or octagonal dwelling with an opening in the domed roof. Such dwellings, as well as the Athabascan-type conical sweat lodge, are considered by the people to be the world or cosmos, with its place of release in the opening above. Reminiscent of the Pueblos is the use of plumed prayer wands, which are set in the four directions outside the ceremonial *hogan* as a means to compel the *Yei* (gods) to come and be present with their curative spiritual powers. Central to the long and complex ceremonies within the *hogan* is the chanting by the singer of myths of creation, the episodes of heroes who purified the earth in primal times, or of other sacred mythic episodes that have specific relationship to the primary cause of the illness in question. These chants must be recited without any error of commission or omission whatsoever. At appropriate times, multicolored sand paintings are laid out with great precision on the clean sand of the *hogan* floor, upon the center of which the patient is seated so that the curative powers of the depicted gods, and of other beings and forms of power, may work for the restoration of harmony, balance, and thus health. Although the patient is the central beneficiary of these sacred rites, it is understood that powers thus generated spread out from the center to bless others who are present and eventually extend outward without limit.

Because the presiding ideal of their religious tradition is the maintenance of balance and harmony in interrelationships with the total environment, it is understandable that the Navajo are under considerable internal stress and tension in their confrontations with a surrounding world that is dominating, threatening, and unpredictable. Participation with this larger American world in foreign wars has intensified these

pressures, even though the Navajo are very proud of their abilities in warfare, for slaying an enemy involves contact with the potentially dangerous ghost of the dead.

One avenue of controlled release from such tensions has long been the intensification on the reservation of witchcraft practices. Because such practices are institutionalized, they do not jeopardize the basic structures and foundations of Navajo life. Other types of possibly more positive responses are in a sense paradoxical, for they have resulted, on the one hand, in intensification of traditional ceremonial activities in order to "decontaminate" those who have been exposed to dangerous forces associated with either the dead or the unfamiliar. On the other hand, and with the pragmatic sense that the Navajo have always shown, they now seek any available additional means for curing their ever-increasing and complex ailments. Here is found at least partial explanation for the Navajo's willing utilization of non-Indian health services, or for their increasing participation in the Native American Church, wherein their central focus is upon the use of the hallucinogenic peyote as curative agent.

Increased adherence to Christian denominations also involves identification of the curative forces with Christian message. It is important to note, however, that historically the Catholic ministries have enjoyed less success among the Navajo than the Protestant or even Mormon missions, due to the fact that there is an incompatibility between core Navajo religious structures and the central rites of the Catholic Church. What is involved is not only the Navajo fear of contamination with ghosts of the dead in relation to the crucifixion of Jesus, but also, the central rites of Holy Communion involve what to the Navajo are abhorrent acts of cannibalism. It remains to be seen in what manner the Navajo will be able to find ways through which the harmony and balance in their world can be maintained. Whatever resolutions or compromises are arrived at, it seems certain from past example that the people will continue to find ways through which their essential identity as Navajo is maintained.

CHRISTIAN "CONVERSION" AMONG AMERICAN INDIANS

The pervasive force of historical Christian ministries has probably had some impact upon all American Indian peoples. The gradations of Indian affiliation with Roman Catholicism and Protestant denominations span two extremes: there are those who have fully accepted the new faith, accompanied by conscious rejection of their own religious traditions and even of their own languages, and those who have been

exposed to elements of Christianity, or who even may once have totally accepted Christianity, but have since returned to an often intensified participation in their own sacred ways. Incomplete evidence suggests that these two groups constitute minorities in relation to those who are situated in unique manner between the two extremes. A key element in the evaluation of Indian affiliation with Christianity, to which sufficient attention has not been given in either scholarly literature or in church documents, lies in a special meaning of conversion for most American Indians, as indeed is the case for most representatives of the primal traditions who have had contact with Christianity.

The following perspective is fundamental to this inquiry. Throughout virtually all indigenous American Indian traditions, a pervasive theme has been that all forms and forces of all orders of the immediately experienced natural environment may communicate to human beings the totality of that which is to be known of the sacred mysteries of creation, and thus of the sacred essence of being and of beings. Orally transmitted sacred lore and accompanying ritual activities that have evolved from such cumulative personal and tribal experience assure the intensification and continuity of participation in the sacred. Such conditioning to openness of mind and being toward manifestations and experiences of the sacred makes it understandable that for these peoples religious matters of whatever origin are not open to either question or argument. When, therefore, the Christian message came to the peoples through dedicated missionaries who led exemplary and sacrificial lives, the people easily understood the truths of message and example due to the profundity of their own beliefs; it was not difficult for them to adopt and adapt new expressions of values into the sacred fabric of their own religious culture. The historical phenomenon is thus not conversion as understood in exclusivistic manner by the bearers of Christianity, but rather a continuation of the people's ancient and traditional facility for what may be termed non-exclusive cumulative adhesion. If this process of polysynthesis can be accomplished with neither confusion nor dissonance, it is ultimately due to the ability of American Indian peoples to penetrate and comprehend the central and most profound nature of all experience and reality. It may therefore be affirmed that American Indian living religions have the right to a legitimate place alongside the great religious traditions of the world.

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