

NATIVE AMERICAN RITUALS AND PRACTICES:

What is identified as a religion?

Church History

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Upon researching the topic of Native American religion practices and rituals, I found it to be a challenging one since finding sources with a complete collection was hard to come by. This is largely due to the fact that the Natives who had resided in what is now the United States of America, had an oral tradition. In this way they traditionally passed on their stories and practices on to the next generation. In so doing, sovereignty and secrecy of their religion practices and rituals were upheld. Therefore, only properly trained male individuals within the tribal groups were chosen and selected to be in the elite group of 'in the know.' This was how their traditional religious practices and rituals were to be passed on and preserved for generations to come.

~~Most~~ ^{More} often than not, oral transpired data soon strays from its origin. As was the case for most Native groups, especially smaller groups or clans such as the Western Apaches. Groups like the Apaches from the west found their history disseminated to the point of almost being legendary. Without proper documentation who is to say what really transpired in the lives of the early Native Americans. Therefore it is difficult to trace the influences of their present practices and rituals. Yet, there are countless material written on such topics available in the mainstream. So in reading and researching Native related topics it is wise to move on with caution.

The language spoken by Native Americans was a conversational language. Their language was not written and had no alphabet. This made it difficult for communicating with the Natives. An early missionary among the Western Apache observantly wrote:

"The early forerunners of the Apache of 1893 and of today possessed no written language and had no alphabet. Their's was a conversational language only. Thus they were unable to record for prosperity their history, culture, religious beliefs and practices. When a group can only pass on vital facts through oral communication there is a good chance that events, rituals, stories, methods, dates and other "vital statistics" will be changed, enhanced, deleted, embellished or lost altogether. This also made it rather

difficult for the early men to communicate with the people, even through an interpreter. One word could mean a phrase and often a whole sentence would be necessary to express one small but vital thought.”¹

Another scholar had this to say on the Native American History and their traditional preservation:

“As white settlers arrived, bringing with them disease, technology, and Christianity, they also brought the English language - a tool which Native Americans, accustomed to an oral tradition, would adopt in an effort to cross the barriers of cultural difference. Serving in their own time as a means of addressing a heedless oppressor, Native American writings have since become a vital record of an experience whose history, as written by the mainstream, is incomplete.”²

On the topic of Native American religion and practices, I by no means will not be attempting to extrapolate the broad study required to unearth some of the practices involving the many different groups of Natives and their beliefs. Therefore, my focus will be more on the Western Apaches and their neighboring group, the Navajos. I will trim down to ~~three~~^{two} generalizations from the Past and Present of Native American religious practices and rituals. I hope that from my findings in this matter prove to be more useful than misleading.

¹ The Ministry Among the Apaches After 100 Years, Guenther, Alchesay Arthur
Arizona Pastoral Conference paper, May 4-5, 1993, pg. 2

² Early Native American Writing, New Critical Essays, edited by Helen Jaskoski,
Foreword by LaVonne Brown Ruoff. Published March 1997

PAST

First, in order to investigate the purpose and the development of today's Native American rituals and practices, it is always wise to look back at the early historical contacts.

Right from the early European contacts with the Natives accounts of them showed that these indigenous cultures in North America had developed their own logical religious systems which included creation myths, which was transmitted orally from one generation to the next, which also aimed to explain how those societies had come into being.

The writer of the Old Testament author of the book of Ecclesiastes writes, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Whether this was the writing of the wise King Solomon himself or another author, the author is certainly right. The early Natives too showed signs of their searching for the Creator god in their own unorthodox way. Like previous cultures and others with them, the Natives too were on the hunt for knowledge and power from the maker of the all things.

A well known Caucasian brother who lived among the Apaches writes this about an early missionary who observed the activities of one of their religious practice and ritual dance known as the Crown Dancers:

"In his writings Mayerhoff often moved beyond description. He offered plausible explanations for Apache behavior. He not infrequently asked the Apaches themselves to interpret what they were doing. On several occasions Mayerhoff watched Apache ceremonies featuring masked dancers. Not only did he refrain~~d~~ from calling the dancers by the ethnocentric term "Devil" but provided an explanation of their moves."³ This is

³ Paul Mayerhoff in *Apacheland*, Kessel, William B. Essay file, EF 1091, pg. 18

what Mayerhoff wrote: Their dance will interpret the behavior of the buck deer in rutting time. Their bodies (of the dancers) are painted white on the chest and darker shades on back, a fringe of evergreens around their loins, and a pendent elongation to simulate a tail. Then the play of the dancers begins: jumping, cavorting, pawing, strutting, stiffly, waving wands, imaginary battle between foes and the favor of the female of the species (Mayerhoff 1936-1937a: VI).

Man from the beginning of time would wrestle^d to obtain wisdom and knowledge from the world around him and yet still would find himself having limits in doing so. A more recent yet dying cliché 'been there, done that,' saying and attitude is a prime example of this resounding clang. In just about anything, something repeated over and over again like a mantra soon becomes the reality. In sticking with the familiar theme, "nothing new under the sun," the many different religions around the world I think pretty much covers it.

In the case of Native American religions, we will all do well to keep in mind to carefully look and study and observe these practices. We can learn from what St. Paul himself, evangelically, did while in Athens in the meeting of the Areopagus. He stood up among unbelievers and said:

"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23).

With^out concessions, various strategies can be used in presenting the gospel truth to unbelievers. Among Native Americans a non confrontational approach is preferred. Unless

one is directly confronted for their Christian orthodoxy stance or is dealt an unavoidable confrontation card. Then by all means a direct attack on a false teaching, wether it be Native or otherwise, I think is inevitable. I myself like the approach certain early missionaries took in these matters:

“Pastor Guenther was careful to present Christianity in a positive light. In his preaching and teaching he seldom mentioned the Apache religion or condemned Apache customs. Like Mayerhoff his predecessor, Guenther believed that his job was to present Christ to the Apaches and the Holy Spirit would lead them to accept Christianity.”⁴

Like all other cultures before the Native Americans and with them, the Indian societies of North America hoped to enlist the aid of the supernatural in controlling the natural and social world, and each tribe had its own set of religious observances devoted to that aim. Some individual tribal members also tried to appease powerful spiritual entities with private prayers or sacrifices of valuable items e.g., food, animal skin, tobacco. Most often though the entire community came together and looked for divine assistance to ensure a successful hunt, a good harvest, or victory in warfare. They called upon medicine men or shamans, priests, and, in fewer tribes, priestesses, whom they believed to have acquired supernatural powers through visions. Some the uncommon abilities of these people included predicting the future and influencing the weather, matters of vital interest to the whole tribe itself. Most of the time shamans or medicine man also assist individuals by interpreting dreams and curing or causing outbreaks of witchcraft.

This was the typical too among the Western Apache. Most of the leaders among them

⁴ Apache Indians and Anglo Missionaries: A study in cross-cultural interaction. Kessel, William B. Essay file, 1093. Pg. 14.

were also shamans or medicine man. They had great influence among their people and so they were chosen at a very young age to fill the leadership position. An early WELS missionary wrote:

“These (Apache) clan leaders were more often than not the shaman or medicine man trained from youth in the chants, songs, incantations as well as the various roots, leaves and berries used in curing ceremonies. He was also the true religious leader and as such dictated the spiritual beliefs and practices of the clan. He was a very powerful man who definitely had to be reckoned with and stood up to by the early men.”⁵

Superstition was also prevalent among Native groups. As is the case among the Western Apaches of yesterday and present day. The fear of death is at the top of their list as with most races. The fear of the unknown just doesn't sit right with them. These fears stemmed from many portions of every day life activities, i.e., dreams, prevalent sicknesses, certain foods, weather conditions, contact with animals, darkness, etc. Although these Native groups were very religious, superstition played a big role in their religious practices and rituals, e.g., death in the family would permit them from performing religious rituals, an owl or signs of death around religious camp grounds would halt all religious activity, etc.

The close kinsmen of the Apache, the Navajo, have their own systems of beliefs and practices as well. Although, the two groups do often commingle religious practices and rituals with each other and offer favors and sometimes at a price with one another. The Navajo is well known in the southwest of its negative response towards Christianity. There religious beliefs

⁵ The Ministry Among the Apaches After 100 Years, Guenther, Alchesay Arthur Arizona Pastoral Conference paper, May 4-5, 1993, pg. 1

run a little stronger and less acculturated with the outside world than other neighboring tribes.

This is due to their strict violation of ritual rules which bring punishments.

The Navajo is also deep into the use of the Peyote cult. Here is the etymology of the name of the name Peyote as explained by Simeon:

“The etymology of this desert plant comes from the Aztec: Pi is the significant (or affix) for ‘little.’ Yau-tli is always something narcotic or strong narcotic-smelling substance. Yau- is the root, -tli the post-positive article (substantive significative). A pi-yautli (peyotl) is therefore the mildly intoxicating poison, in contrast with Hau-yaulti (today Guayule, sap of the Gum-tree, which smells very strong) which means extremely intoxicating. Remi Simeon, in his Nahuatl dictionary of 1885, lists Peyotl or Peyutl - A plant whose root served to make a drink that took the place of wine (Sahagun); silkworm cocoon; pericardium, envelope of the heart.”⁶

The neighboring Mescalero Apaches also dabble with the Peyote plant. This tribe also treks south to get the plant as did the Plains groups. This plant was kept by the shaman for ceremonial purposes only. The primary purpose of the meetings was for doctoring, though occasionally a peyote meeting was called for some other purposes, i.e., sources of supernatural power to locate an enemy, finding lost objects, foretelling the results of a venture, etc. A typical sweat bath practice began the ritual at noon and then when night fell the shaman and the people enlisting the help entered the tipi and so their ritual began.⁷

In both, Apache and Navajo, their religious practice and rituals, the public was always

⁶ The Peyote Cult, Weston La Barre, New York City 1969, pg. 16.

⁷ The Peyote Cult, Weston La Barre, New York City 1969, pg. 46.

kept from view. In both cases the religion practices and rituals were not easily made available for studying or observance even within the tribal group. The traditions were passed on in secrecy. Yet, another reason of the incompleteness in the Native American religions history.

PRESENT

Although many of the Native groups want to return to their 'old way' of religious practices and rituals, Christianity has worked its way into the picture:

“Even as brief as some of the early accounts indicate, many key Native religious beliefs and practices bore broad but striking resemblances to those current among early modern Europeans, both Catholicism and Protestantism. These cultures, too, credited a creation myth (as set forth in Genesis), venerated a Creator God, dreaded a malicious subordinate deity (Lucifer), and looked forward to the individual soul's immortality in an afterlife superior in every respect to the here and now. They, too, propitiated their deity with prayers and offerings and relied upon a specially trained clergy to sustain their societies during periods of crisis. Finally, the great majority of early modern Europeans feared witches and pondered the meaning of their dreams. Most native peoples worshiped an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator or Spirit God. They also feared or appeased a host of lesser supernatural entities, including an evil god who dealt out disaster, suffering, and death. Finally, most tribal members believed in the immortality of the human soul and an afterlife, the main feature of which was the abundance of every good thing that made earthly life worth living for.”⁸

⁸ Early Native American Writing, *New Critical Essays*, edited by Helen Jaskoski, Foreword by LaVonne Brown Ruoff. Published March 1997

In the past Native peoples selectively borrowed from Christianity, picking and choosing certain elements of Catholic or Protestant belief and ritual which they then combined with traditional Indian practices. There are varying ways in which individual Native Americans and whole tribes participated in this process. One case in point was an Apache name Silas John. He was selected by the early WELS missionaries to help with interpreting God's Word. Here is what was written on this matter:

“In 1911 Pastor Edgar Guenther arrived in East Fork and began mission work. He enlisted the help of Silas John Edwards, a very bright Apache youth. Guenther first taught Silas about the Bible through the use of liberally illustrated Bible history books. The story of Moses and the Bronze serpent particularly impressed Silas. In time the Apache became aⁿ interpreter for the Lutherans. Eventually, however, he severed relations with the Lutherans and began a religious cult which incorporated traditional Apache beliefs with Christianity (Kessel 1976:142-185). This syncretistic rattlesnake cult seriously threatened the advance of Christianity for years.”⁹

Are there still concerns about this today? The wide and opened practice of the Apache Sunrise Dance seem to point that way. This of course, as with any false teaching, needs to be addressed and dealt with. The following describes the traditional dance:

“Among the Apache peoples in the American Southwest, the ceremony that honors a girl's passage to womanhood and that teaches her how to live properly as an Apache woman is a ceremony central to the religious traditions of the entire people. The

⁹ Apache Indians and Anglo Missionaries: A study in cross-cultural interaction. Kessel, William B. Essay file, 1093. Pg. 12-11.

na'ih'es, as the ceremony is known in the language of the San Carlos Apache of eastern Arizona, marks an individual girl's rite of passage to womanhood. In addition, because the girl is ritually "sung into" her identity as Changing Woman, a primary deity for the Apache, the ceremony is also understood to bring renewal to the entire community and to the entire world."¹⁰

Although this practice is wide spread among Western Apaches, only a few totally understand the entire process of this practice. The average Apache would not have a clue as to what is taking place in the Apache Sunrise Dance, less he derives with his own interpretation. Most will answer with an unconcerned manner and reply that it is a social gathering. In the minds of most, I believe this is true. It true to the fact that traditionally Natives were unlikely to share religious beliefs and there how to practices of it all. I interviewed my mother and asked her about the wide spread of the Apache religion and it's practice and rituals. She recalls that the Apache religion was never spoken of. She said that the only time religious matters came up among the Apache was if an illness or someone was struggling with life or if someone was in trouble with relatives or the law.

As far as the early "conversion" of Natives, this is what was said:

"This is how the process of "conversion" typically unfolded among Native American peoples. Indians did not simply replace one faith with another, nor did most converts cynically pretend to embrace Christian convictions. Instead, native beliefs and rituals gradually became intermixed with Christian elements, exemplifying a process known as *religious syncretism*--a creative combination of the elements of different religious

¹⁰ Religions of the United States In Practice, vol. 2. Edited by Colleen McDannell. Princeton University Press. 2001. Pg. 194.

traditions yielding an entirely new religious system capable of commanding broad popular loyalties. It yielded a broad spectrum of results, ranging from native peoples' accepting almost entirely the Christianity of the dominant white society to tribal attempts at revitalizing traditional Indian religions and, in some instances, renewing their resistance to Euro-American efforts at military and cultural conquest."¹¹

The presence of Native American religions in the United States will remain as long as the people who practice it's rituals remain.

"The diversity of American Indian tribes precludes a comprehensive examination of their religions and their belief systems. Anthropologists have compiled a huge trove of information detailing practices and beliefs of many different groups; this information remains isolated from popular culture. While there is a proliferation of popularized versions of Native American spirituality, these are often not the products of the tribes or their members. The beliefs and practices of many groups are sectarian derivatives of other native groups, and there is also a significant infusion of Christianity, and more recently, New Age beliefs and practices permeating these traditional beliefs."¹²

Conclusion

Although Native American religions might remain and continue to be practiced, ~~Certainly~~ aspects of the religion itself are still in question~~d~~. Whether aboriginal movements

¹¹ Early Native American Writing, New Critical Essays, edited by Helen Jaskoski, Foreword by LaVonne Brown Ruoff. Published March 1997

¹² New Religious Movements. Created by Michael Doak. Spring Term, 1997
University of Virginia Last modified: 12/28/01

will make a come back is hard to say. Analyzing too has its limitations. But the fact that these false movements will most likely continue, all the more so are we compelled to spread the Gospel Truth of the Word of God in it's pure form. Our Lord Jesus thus commanded his followers, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all Nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Endnotes

1. The Ministry Among the Apaches After 100 Years, Guenther, Alchesay Arthur
Arizona Pastoral Conference paper, May 4-5, 1993, pg. 2.
2. Early Native American Writing, New Critical Essays, edited by Helen Jaskoski,
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3. Paul Mayerhoff in Apacheland, Kessel, William B. Essay file, EF 1091, pg. 18.
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6. The Peyote Cult, Weston La Barre, New York City 1969, pg. 16.
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