

CIS Bulletin: Native American Religions

A Publication of the Center for Interfaith Studies, Inc.

Gary Leazer, Ph. D.

© 2009 All Rights Reserved

Population: More than 2 million American Indians, Eskimos, and Alaska Native. Population is growing, the U. S. Census Bureau estimates the number will increase to about 4 million by 2050. American Indians are not a dying race. Navajo are the largest language group of Native Americans with approximately 148,500 speakers. Many Native American languages and dialects have been lost and many Native Americans speak only English.

Most Native Americans live in Oklahoma.

(These figures do not take into consideration the Native Americans in Central and South America.)

Who is an American Indian?: Natives did not call themselves "Indians;" They often referred to themselves as simply "The People," or by tribal names: Kickapoo, Cheyenne, Dakota, etc. Then Columbus got lost and thought he was in India when he stumbled upon natives on the islands in the Caribbean. He called the people he met "Indians" and the term stuck. [Aren't you glad Columbus wasn't looking for "Turkeys"?] There are approximately 230 tribes in the U. S.

Tribe is the basic term used to describe a group of Native Americans with the same language and way of life. Subgroups include a "band" or political unit such as a village or town, and "clan" or extended family group with a common line of descent. The American Indian is the only ethnic group in the U. S. that must prove its ethnicity.

Determination is usually made by blood quantum or a certain percentage of American Indian blood in a person; the blood quantum is often 25 percent. Some tribes have different criteria to be a legally member of that tribe. Most Native Americans share four distinct DNA lines. DNA strongly suggests Native Americans are descended from Asian people groups.

Where did they come from? Most scholars believe they came in perhaps three migrations across the Bering Strait from Asia beginning about 30,000 years ago; others think they arrived as early as 100,000 year ago. The oldest artifact so far discovered dates to 27,000 years ago.

Europeans created wild theories about the origins of the Native Americans. One theory, mentioned as a possibility by the explorers Lewis and Clark, was that North Dakota Natives were descended from Welsh immigrants. Others thought they were Egyptians (or at least influenced by Egyptians) because of the pyramids found in South and Central America.

Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church, claimed the Native Americans were Jews who fled from Jerusalem in about 600 B.C. and then sailed across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, just before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 587/6 B.C. According to Smith's theory, Jesus Christ came to America and evangelized the Natives during the period between his resurrection and ascension. The church begun by Christ during his visit has since disappeared. Therefore,

Native Americans are Hebrews. [This fable is laid out in the Book of Mormon.]

Like other tribal groups, Native Americans developed many stories about their creation. These stories were handed down orally from generation to generation. Some stories tell how the land and creatures emerged from watery depths. A Hopi creation story says that the earth, before it took shape, was mist. A Pueblo creation story tells of two sisters who lived underground. One day they climbed up the roots of a tree into the sunlight through a hole in the ground. One of these first humans became the mother of the Pueblo tribe.

Many Natives cultures: When the Natives arrived in the Americas, they developed various cultures. Many outsiders see Native Americans as a simply culture with the same beliefs and practices; this is not an accurate picture. Often, the place where Native groups settled, whether in the harsh cold of the Arctic or the warm, humid Southeast, had a lot to do with the culture which arose.

Some, like the Clovis of New Mexico, became big game hunters using spears to bring down mammoths and giant bison. Early Natives also learned to drive stampeding herd over cliffs or into swamps for easier kills. These Natives were often nomadic and followed the animals that were their primary food source.

Some cultures later settled in single locations and adopted agriculture as their basic food source. Their settlements sometimes became quite large. For example, the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, Colorado, were inhabited from A.D. 1200 to 1300.

Beliefs and Practices: Mounds were built by some cultures. Mounds were sometimes shaped like a bird, bear or snake. The Rock Eagle in Georgia is one of the better known effigy mounds. Pyramid-like structures were sometimes built with a flattened top upon which was erected a structure for



Cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde in southern Colorado.

worship. These structures as well as worship on top of Stone Mountain in Georgia suggests the sun was considered a deity or god.

Reverence for Mother Earth and all life was a central part of Native American religion. A hunter may pray to the spirit of an animal that he wants to kill; then ask for forgiveness after he has done so.

When a Fox Indian would cut down a tree, he might leave an offering of tobacco for the tree, and then not waste any of the tree. Papago women of southern Arizona might say to clay they dig for pots, "I take only what I need. It is to cook for my children." She might also leave a small gift of maize, tobacco, stones, shells, etc. as an offering.

Dancing was a central part of the rituals used to contact the spirit world. Hopis released snakes to ask the rain god to send rain. Buffalo dances were held to ensure success in buffalo hunting. The sun dance was the chief ceremony of the Plains Indians and was held to gain supernatural power or to thank a spirit for some special aid.

Among the Inuit in the Arctic region, Shamanism played an important part in the life of the tribe. Shamans called upon spirit forces believed to inhabit natural and living objects, including humans and animals. It was believed Shamans placated the spirits to ensure success in hunting, control the weather, cure or cause illness and foresee the future. Shamans were greatly respected for their powers – and sometimes feared. The shaman usually had some knowledge of medicine and could set broken bones. Guinine was used to treat malaria. Many other plants first used by Indians are now used in modern medicine.

Shamans appeared in tribes that followed food sources such as migrating animals more than in tribes which had settled in single locations. These tribes depended on kachinas or ancestor spirits to bring rain for crops; they appeared as masked dancers during the summer when rain was most needed.

Subarctic Natives believed in the Windigo or cannibal monster who was thought to infect people with the desire to consume human flesh.

Men in tribes in the Plains region of Canada and the U. S. actively sought spirit guides through visions. Tribes in southern California held initiation ceremonies for young men that included going without food, wounding themselves and drinking a potion from jimsonweed. The potion induced visions, from which each of the young men — and in some tribes, girls — acquired their personal guardian spirit.



In the Pacific Northwest and parts of Alaska, Native Americans carved totem poles to represent animal or bird spirits. A totem can be the symbol of a tribe, clan, family or individual. Though people may identify with different animal guides throughout their lifetimes, it is this one totem animal that acts as the main guardian spirit.

Native Americans had little developed understanding of an afterlife. Yet, fear of the spirits of the dead was strong in some tribes. No one spoke the name of the dead person, in case the spirit might think someone was calling it back to earth. The deceased's body, house and belongings might be burned so his spirit could not use them. Places of burial were considered especially sacred and were generally avoided. The idea of a "happy hunting ground" is a white man's invention.

Like many tribal groups, rock art or painting, called petroglyphs, were used for many reasons, some religious, some for unknown reasons. Spirals might signify the sun's movement, or the passage of time, and may have been used as a type of ritual calendar. Animal figures may have played roles in rituals or prayers for successful hunting. Maize plants might represent a successful harvest. Some symbols evidently represent family, clan, or ceremonial society affiliation. Other symbols may have given directions to water or the next village.

The Petroglyph National Monument, near Albuquerque, New Mexico, contains 15,000 petroglyphs, most dating between 1300 and 1650, but some as old as 2,000 years.

Kivas are underground or partly underground chambers, usually round in shape with a flat packed dirt floor and ceiling, in a Pueblo village, used by the men and boys especially for ceremonies or councils. Kivas were/are sometimes square, rectangle or other shapes. Women perform their rituals and ceremonies in other parts of the pueblo and generally avoid entering the kiva. A small hole in its floor, the *sípapu*, serves as the symbolic place from which the first members of the tribe emerged. The room is usually entered through a roof hatchway by means of a ladder whose poles extend well above the flat rooftop. A stone bench was placed next to the wall. A fire pit was in the center of the kiva; shafts allowed the smoke to escape. When the men and boys had all gathered, they would smoke, weave or talk about important matters



A kiva at Glorieta Pass east of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is a fine example of an underground kiva. It is located near an old Catholic church and convent and is easily reached by automobile. Notice the ladder used to enter the kiva.

facing the village. Sometimes they would dance to invoke the spirits, bless the crops or give thanks. Other scholars dismiss the religious significance of the kivas, holding that kivas were used primarily as community centers.

The Maya

The Maya developed one of the most advanced civilizations in the Western Hemisphere before the arrival of Europeans. They lived in the region that is now eastern and southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and western Honduras where they thrived for 3,000 years. The Maya built massive stone pyramids, temples, sculpture and art; developed a well-ordered social class system; the developed a calendar and had a well-developed religious system; developed a system of writing using hieroglyphs; and recorded their achievements in mathematics and astronomy..

Mayan civilization began about 2,000 B. C. Although the Mayan empire began to decline around A. D. 900, it was still a powerful empire when the Spanish arrived in the 16th century.

Only three early Mayan books remain; all made of tree bark. Other simply rotted or were destroyed by the Spanish who saw them as works of the devil.

The Mayan worshipped a number of gods and goddesses, most of whom were related to agriculture. The supreme god was Hunab Ku, the eyes and mouth of sun and lord of Heavens. He was the deity of the royal lineage and was worshiped as the God of day and night, responsible for rain, writing and medicine. Yum Kaax, the maize deity was the God of the common people; he protected the crops and fields from destruction. Women and children worshiped the Deity of Ix Chel (the lady rainbow) as the Goddess for healing, childbirth and weaving. Ixtab was the Goddess of suicide; Mayans believed that persons who committed suicides went to a special heaven. The wicked are punished in hell, which is underground.

The Mayan conducted elaborate religious ceremonies to please gods during times of famine, epidemics or droughts. Maize (corn), fruit, game and blood were often offered to the gods; the blood from the worshipper who would pierce some part of his own body (usually the tongue, ears or lips). One myth says humans were made from maize; another myth says thirteen gods created humans. The Mayan also made both human and animal sacrifices with the heart removed from the living person or animal. Humans sacrificed were generally children, slaves or prisoners of war.



The maize god (left) and the rain god from a Mayan book.

21 December 2012

We often speak of the Arabic numbers (0, 1, 2, 3, etc.) but we are wrong when we do. The Arabs actually borrowed the numbers from scholars in India.

Europeans did not fully accept the zero, which was invented by Asian Indians in the 9th century, until the 17th century. Before that time, the Maya had also discovered the value of the zero and had come up with a calendar.



This Aztec calendar was an adaptation of the Mayan calendar. It consisted of a 365-day agricultural calendar, as well as a 260-day sacred calendar. (This is a digital composite. Color added for visibility.)

The Maya calendar uses three different dating systems in parallel, the Long Count (for periods longer than 52 years), the Tzolkin (a divine calendar for 52-year cycles), and the Haab (a civil calendar of 260 days). The Haab consists of 20 cycles of 13 days each; 13 and 20 are sacred Mayan numbers.

The Long Count calendar is of more interest to many people today. Many anthropologists believe the Long Count began approximately on 11 August 3114 B.C., according to the Gregorian calendar. Since there is no evidence that the Long Count is meant to be repeating, some believe that the Mayans expected the world to end at the completion of the Long Count cycle, which will be in 21 December 2012.

According to some popular astrologers and New Age thinkers, it is on this day that an apocalypse or similar revolutionary global event will take place. Many books and theories have been published for what might happen on 21 December 2012. Will the world end in some cataclysmic event? Will the world enter some "new age" of peace and enlightenment like the Age of Aquarius so popular in the last three decades of the 1900s? Will the world go on without any significant change? Or did the Maya create the calendar to indicate that the Mayan civilization would be around for a very long time, namely until 21 December 2012?