

Lecture #3

North America

North American Indians

In the middle of the 16th century, when the first Europeans began settling in Indian territory, there were more than 2,000 independent indian tribes living there, frequently in a state of war.

modes of life of the tribes varied according to natural resources available.

Salmon fishing in the n.e. coast, caribou hunting in the sub-arctic zone of canada, stag hunting in forest regions and buffalo hunting on the great plains.

where climate permitted, maize was grown, for ex, by the Iroquois in the east, in the great lakes area, and to an even greater extent by the pueblo tribes in the lower Colorado valleys of the southwest.

there were no other means of subsistence, wild crops were gathered by several tribes, the worst off being some hunter-gathering tribes in southern Calif. who lived mainly on acorns.

The basic economy dictated the type of habitat in each case: permanent villages for farmers, tents for the semi-nomadic hunters who followed game (by the way, horses that were brought in by the spanish in the 17th cent. furnished fresh incentive for the raiding indians of the plains.)

linguistically, the tribes belonged to different families; those found in the great lakes area were the Algonquins, Sioux and Iroquois.

the apache and navajo are of the athapaskin group, the navajo being relative newcomers to the S.W., beating the spanish by only a couple hundred years.

social structure, together with the institutions and rituals involved likewise produced distinct types.

Priests on the one hand who carried out rituals, and the medicine man or shaman who was more or less independent of the priest and claimed powers of healing, of producing rain and guaranteeing the success of individual and collective enterprise.

the major part of some 300 surviving tribes has been confined to reservations in the past century .

those people who were not farmers have seen great changes in their way of life

social behaviour has been modified by increasing influence of white civilization.

traditional indian mythology originally grew up in a framework that has now been discarded.

there have been few additions to ancestral ideas. the relative importance of the creator has been emphasised, sometimes as a result of the influence of Christian preaching.

occasionally local indian prophets predicting the return of the dead and the re-establishment of the past have instituted

ceremonial dances in preparations for this return (Ghost Dance).
-finally, the peyotl cult has spread from Mexico.

In its most classical form, North American mythology reveals common basic traits that lie beyond the seeming disparities of regional variations.

the principle common denominator is the very active role assigned a body of protective or evil spirits: by comparison, the creator of the universe remains in the background, especially as far as human fate is concerned.

The majority of protective spirits are mythical animals, but also include the sun (worshipped by the hunters of the plains and farmers), stars (the Pawnee of Nebraska), thunder or "thunderbirds", gods of maize, spirits of mountains, rivers or such minerals as flint used for arrowheads.

in contrast to these protectors, there are also great monsters such as the Kwakiutl cannibals from the N.W. Pacific coast, or the Algonquin horned water-serpent.

tiny creatures that are waggish rather than wicked haunt woods and pools.

the spirits of the dead are to be feared, for they come to steal men's souls and to inflict death unless the medicine man intervenes

in actual fact, all supernatural beings possess ambivalent powers, since protectors kill men's enemies and evil spirits accord their patronage to certain privileged people (members of

certain bodies or medicine men).

protective spirits and the creator of the cosmos usually reside in celestial worlds or on mountain tops.

monsters inhabit underground worlds and the depths of the sea.

the land of the dead is sometimes thought to be in the sky at the end of the Milky Way, tho sometimes (rarely) underground.

thus indians regard the universe as a series of worlds one above the other with the world of men at the center.

another fundamental feature of Indian thought is the link between the different worlds or cosmic sectors, and the six points of space

a sacred color is associated with each sector or direction.

the Zuni tribe of NM and several other pueblo societies think of the north as yellow, west as blue, south as red and east as white. the zenith as multicolored and the nadir as black.

each sector, each real or mythical mountain on the human horizon is associated with various animal vegetable and mineral species.

farmers also associated them with the 6 varieties of maize, each of which is given symbolically one of the 6 colors of space.

animals, plants and minerals, the source of material prosperity, are thought to be under the domination of protective spirits, who grant them to humans when the appropriate rites are performed.

in most traditions the universe is described as having passed thru an initial phase in which the populations consisted of animals and occasionally of seemingly anthropomorphic creatures who behaved like humans, but at the same time played the part of demiurges and "transformers." or *tricksters*

the major hero varies according to the individual regions and their geographical and cultural divisions.

in alaska and the Northern part of N.W pacific coast, he is a raven (there are similarities with siberian myth here); farther south he is a blue jay, a coyote on the Columbia plateau and plains, a rabbit in the great basin and in the S.E, a hare in certain eastern communities.

anthropologically speaking, American indians belong to the Asiatic race. Definite cultural affinities have been noted between Siberian traditions and N. W. Indian traditions; both, for ex, recount the adventure-cycle of the Raven setting the world to order.

the first step of these mythical animals or heroes was to bring order into the cosmos.

they gained possession of fire, wind, rain and snow by dint of petty thefts cunningly carried out in a variety of supernatural places, the main one being the House of the Sun.

these animals also formed the features of the land.

the animals who brought civilization to the world were divided

into peoples; and the tale of their rivalries is known to humans;

Ultimately they decided to institute death, so as to avoid over-population and famine.

Myths show them to be wise and intelligent, engaged in a systematic struggle against monsters, but at the same time cruel, egotistical, licentious, covetous and greedy.

sometimes these animals were stupid and ended up in more trouble because of their traps set for others.

finally, this first mythical universe was destroyed, either by fire or flood, at the instigation of monsters.

in one Alaskan myth, for ex, the Frog-woman or Volcano-woman (who gave humans copper) destroyed the world by fire.

a culture hero is responsible for the Flood, altho his intention may have been to destroy monsters.

an Algonquin Manibozho decided to produce a flood to extinguish a fire lit by his adversaries.

Manibozho himself took refuge on a mountainside with a few animals.

when the waters began to recede he ordered the muskrat to dive down for some mud so that he could form the earth and men.

He taught the latter the techniques necessary for survival; he established social institutions, he prescribed ceremonial ritual.

coyote and other culture heroes did the same.

there is proof of this in a Crow myth found among the Sioux

tribes in Montany, which also shows how primitive mythology absorbed later elements.

in this legend Coyote is described as having invented horses, altho the only domestic animal the indians had before the arrival of the Spaniards was the dog. - do 5 main concepts →

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NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN MYSTICISM

This ^{section} ~~lecture~~ will use the idea of mystical experience in the broadest sense and will therefore not fit precisely into my previous discussion of mysticism for several reasons.

the main difference is that with native american indians we are dealing with a oral tradition rather than a written one so all that can be gleaned is from this oral tradition.

of necessity, we will deal mainly with the professional mystics known as shamans.

shamanism and the world of spirits has been called the worlds oldest religion, and certainly it is.

shamans can be either male or female in this aboriginal situation for they are "called" by various ways to be such and it doesn't depend on gender.

However, before I get into Shaamanism I need to mention many other things about N.A. Indian religion.

Indians do not think of their beliefs as a religion but prefer to think of it as "the Sacred"

like most aboriginal or archaic thought systems the american Indian does not see that sacred and secular are seperate things but rather all things can manifest the sacred.

Native american sacred ways limit the amount of explaining a person can do about about the mysteries of life, death, etc.

in this way they guide a person's behaviour toward the world and its natural laws.

Many native americans sacred teachings suggest that if people try to explain everything or seek to leave nothing unexplored in the universe, they will bring disaster upon themselves, for then they are

trying to be like gods, not humans.

one of the great strengths of Native American sacred ways is their viability or adaptability.

These ways are viable because they were aboriginally, and in many cases still are, practical systems of knowledge.

the "scientists" of the sacred were holy people working together, arguing, challenging, playing so that life could go on; so the people could, as far as possible, live well and long.

originally, sacred ways and practices were at the heart of living and survival.

there was not a part of life that was not touched by these traditions.

The core of native american sacred beliefs and practices remains virtually unchanged from classic tribal times.

this way does not try to explain or control all phenomena in the universe, or try to dominate people's thoughts or personal worship, such as "schools" of philosophy or organized religion does.

however, one of the concepts held by the Elders to be very important is that of respect.

Great respect is held for those who protect sacred ways and help them grow.

A human being's spiritual life is his/her most important expression of their humanity

to respect this this is something the Elders teach in almost every tribal community on North America.

they are non-sectarian and are just ways of seeking life.

This way of the Sacred gives a world view to the native americans within which they can understand life.

a worldview, as defined by an indian anthropologist, denotes a distinctive vision of reality which not only interprets and orders the places and events in the experience of a people, but lends form, direction and continuity to life as well.

a worldview provides a distinctive set of values, an identity, a feeling of rootedness, of belonging to a time and place and a sense of continuity with a tradition which transcends the experience of a single lifetime, or even time.

DEFINITIONS OF SACRED WAYS

part of this world view held by a people in common begins with some kind of intangible, spiritual experience which is a vision or understanding given to one or more individuals.

those times when they actually experience a hidden meaning in that vision are sacred moments.

religions are, at their core, made up of sacred moments and sacred knowledge which sometimes organized religions lose sight of the emotions and sacred moments that are their guiding vision.

Most native american sacred ways allow for constant individual and collective revitalization of the emotions and mystical experiences that make up the core of their guiding vision.

The sacred is also something that is shared, and this sharing or collective experience is necessary in order to keep the oral traditions and sacred ways vital.

there are two sides to the sacred: the personal ecstatic side that individuals find hard to describe, and

second, the part of the sacred that is shared and defined year after year thru oral histories, ritual and other ceremonies and customs.

virtually all aboriginal peoples, as I have said before but cannot overemphasise, feel that the sacred ways are inseparable from the "ordinary."

knowledge should not be searched for apart from the sacred for knowledge comes during those moments when one experiences a hidden meaning, ie, sacred moments.

WISDOM AND DIVINITY

FOR most sacred traditions there is this double quest for wisdom and divinity.

these two quests must be kept in harmony and balance. a person will have problems when they sacrifice the quest for divinity, or the sacred, for knowledge only.

an Eskimo Shaman spoke of the fact that people today live weakly because they cannot do one thing at a time.

he says he learned this by being silent in the great lonely stillness of the dark, thru visions and dreams and encounters with flying spirits.

the ancients, he says, devoted their lives to maintaining the balance of the universe but now they are priests or doctors, weather prophets or conjurers selling their skill for pay.

he says the power they call SILA, which is not to be explained in simple words is a great spirit supporting the world and the weather and all life on earth.

it is a spirit so mighty that what it says to humankind is not thru common words, but by storm and snow and rain and the fury of the sea--all the forces that humans fear.

no one has seen Sila; its place of being is a mystery, in that it is at once among us and unspeakably far away.

these eskimos of Baffin Bay see their lives as devoted towards "maintaining the balance of the universe."

WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THE SACRED

there are six main characteristics or basic elements of the sacred traditions among native american peoples of North America which I will discuss.

as one eskimos shaman said: "in our ordinary, everyday life we do not think much about all these things (the sacred realm) and only when asked do these thoughts come."

these are things usually experiences and they they disappear into dreams, songs, dances or just wondering.

as the people work and play and learn from living in the world, sacred experiences grow with them.

a growing individual is given the opportunity to express his/her visions, dreams, or newly discovered experiences.

there are also certain Elder people one can go to for instruction and advice.

however, there may be prohibitions about discussing certain aspects of their religion with everyone.

also, there is no academic or educational context within which to talk about things like religion or traditional philosophy.

the elders teach respect for other people's ways of worshipping. this is a basic tool for living a long and good life.

→ now, to the ⁵~~six~~ main concepts held by all native americans with more attention given to the shaman, the professional mystic, I will do that last.

1. A belief in or knowledge of Unseen Powers

one thing most native american people have in common in their sacred knowledge is the existence of unseen powers. which may take the form of deities or more of a "feeling" that something exists and is sacred or mysterious.

these are usually worshipped in elaborate ceremonial dances, with intricate precise movements and languages.

the Hopi and the Zuni people dramatized their relationships to the unseen powers in the Kachina dances. where various kachinas portray aspects of life by their masks, their costumes, the movements of their dances, hands and feet.

the pueblo people in general have a complex way of seeing and portraying this mystery of life.

there are many societies, kiva activities, intricate designs for body painting, many prayers, songs, legends and other sources of knowledge about the sacred powers..

more primitive indians have a simpler way of seeing the world than these.

the Pit River people of northern California is described thus:

. . the life of these indians is nothing but a continuous religious experience. . to them, the essence of religion is the 'spirit of wonder'.. . the recognition of life as power, as a mysterious, concentrated form of non-material energy, of something loose about the world and contained in a more or less condensed degree by every object.

the mystery and power is referred to in the language of the Souix as Waken'tanka who is believed to be everywhere including the spirits of the ancestors.

anything with power is considered to be Waken, but the sun is the most power of all, for the sun controls the seasons, tho any object can contain Waken--thunderstones, charred wood, obsidian, feathers, all plants, etc.

how does a human being know about these unseen powers?

many native people say it is the soul of a person that reaches out to touch the mysteries.

dreams and visions are born in the soul, and it is our soul that can wonder about things beyond the ordinary world.

the specialist in these problems, persons in contact with the mysteries, would say that "the greatest sacred thing is knowing the order and the structure of things."

medicine people have discovered that everything in the world is made up of 4 elements: earth, water, air and light (heat, fire). they stay together or maintain their "shape" by a balance of these elements in their structures, each of which is different.

thus, to know a plant, one must know its own particular order and structure.

the plant has its own mind that you learn to know so you can use it in healing or whatever.

2. all things are dependent on each other

another concept held in common is that all things in the universe are dependent on one another.

though everything has its own individual place, it is dependent on and shares in the growth and work of everything else.

for ex., if you take the life of an animal you have to let that animal know why you are doing so and that you are taking full responsibility of your act.

human beings and animals have a relationship to one another.

the elders and the oral histories tell that long ago we once could speak the language of animals and that our survival depended on maintaining the relationships between animals, plants, rivers, feeding grounds, etc.

the reverse is also true. together with the knowledge that everything is dependent upon everything else comes a respect which borders on fear.

we are all related and therefore must be constantly aware of how our actions will affect others.

the universe is balanced. a concept at the root of Native North American sacred traditions is that all the elements in the universe are paired and balance each other.

often healing ceremonies are held to find the source of imbalance that causes an illness once diagnosed, then healing can proceed.

one important "pair" is that of male and female.

in Navajo philosophy (as in Chinese) everything you see must be both male and female and within each sex is both .

other pairs that are fundamental to N. A. sacred tradition are cardinal directions, night and day, moon and sun, moist and dry, tree and stone, dark and light.

the idea of good and evil, the most important pair in most religions, is not as important as the problem of balance and imbalance--or harmony and disharmony.

evil is essentially seen as excess or imbalance and it can be adjusted and corrected thru various means.

the pair of life and death is one of the great pairs, but tho it brings separation, it is not the end of existence for consciousness remains.

usually death was brought by one of the tricksters such as raven, coyote, rattlesnake or spider thru some blunder or joke.

these are two -faced creatures, who helped in creation and brought good but also brought death.

3. worship is a personal commitment to the sources of life

there is an important and necessary link between individual worship and community well-being it is felt that each individual prayer reinforces the bond between the human being and the Great Powers.

life is made easier if you share pain.

worship is a way of giving thanks and centering oneself in the world.

before a person acts--planting corn, going to war, killed a deer-- a prayer was usually given.

this is done to prepare the individual for the effects the act will have on themselves, the community and nature.

one has to make themselves receptive to knowledge and divinity by following certain procedures.

1. purifying you erase your thoughts, get rid of all poisons and excesses in your body through sweatbaths, herbal drinks to cause vomiting, bathing smoking and smudging to make yourself empty.

2. blessing. you pray, call or ask for power and strength. pray for yourself and others because when they are healthy and strong you are also.

3. sacrificing take something of yourself and give it free of charge. you take a part of yourself and do so because you believe you are connected to everything else so become aware of yourself as a part of everything. you suffer momentarily so that someone else will not have to.

all these procedures are accompanied by songs, music and perhaps dancing.

in the past the solitary Vision Quest was undertaken.

an individual went off alone for four to five days of fasting and lamenting to seek a vision, and required help of people before and after the vigil.

during the vision quest, the person had to think about all those things that made him or her strong--relatives, happy events, in life, and the possibility that some spirit might come to them during this time.

many spirits, powers, and other elements were called upon as well.

vision quests were almost exclusively a phenomena of the plains tribes and northern woodland tribes.

traditionally the People did not rely on the concept of hell or sin to make people religious people worshipped because they wanted to or needed to and because it was a continual part of their lives.

Luther Standing bear in his book Land of the Spotted Eagle writes:

The Indian loved to worship. from Birth to death he revered his surroundings. . .there was nothing between him and the Big Holy. the contact was immediate and personal. . .Waken Tanka was not aloof, apart, and ever seeking to quell evil forces. He did not punish the animals and the birds, and likewise He did not punish man. He was not a punishing God. / . . There was but one ruling power, and that was Good.

HUMOR IS A NECESSARY PART OF THE SACRED

most native american sacred traditions have a common belief that humor is a necessary part of the sacred and a belief that human beings are often weak which leads us to do foolish things therefore clowns and similar figures are needed to show people how to act and why.

the object of a great part of the sacred traditions of the People was and is to ease the journey on the path of life.

too much power, too much seriousness, were to be feared for they too could "unbalance" life in the community and the environment.

SHAMANISM AND THE WORLD OF SPIRITS; THE OLDEST RELIGION

most communities and tribes recognize individuals who are responsible for specialized, perhaps secret, knowledge.

these individuals help pass on knowledge and sacred practices from generation to generation storing what they know in their memories.

these people devote their lives and vocation to learning about the mysteries of the world and knowing and manipulating the relationships by which the world operates.

often these people have greater hardships than most: personal injury, fright, anxiety, and loneliness.

they also, if they succeed on their quest, have greater responsibility

they are responsible for maintaining a balanced relationship between the people and the natural world and the world and sacred powers.

these shamans usually choose a specialty, curing illness, insuring hunting success, seeking lost objects, etc.

the word shaman comes from the Tungus language of the tungus people who live in Siberia.

these have been viewed as the prototype or clearest example of all the shamanistic traits and like the aboriginal cultures of North America, in the tribal cultures of Central and North Asia, including Siberia, the sacred life of the people is centered around the shaman.

shamans are individuals who, through some inborn sensitivity or need, take as their vocation the quest for knowledge that uses a direct attempt at experiencing the Mysteries.

usually the most powerful shamans are people who are forced by illness, a compelling dream

or vision, or some other need , to become shamans whether they want to or not.

this shaman to be will seek out a practitioner to get guidance and advice to learn to control the forces that are making life miserable of him/her.

in addition, the shaman to be also seeks his/her own knowledge thru tests which include vision quests, "wanderings" s and other situations which force a confrontation between the shaman to be and the forces which give life--or the mysteries.

he or she may receive a strong dream or vision

as one shaman points out:

When you see something with your inner eyes, that means with all your soul and spirit. in the dream or the vision, the individual experienced all that happens in the vision as if they were awake.

the shaman to be may be taught how to call on his/her spirit helper again in the future.

the dream or vision may also be the ultimate learning experience for the individual in training. in it the trainee finally experiences a "clear picture" of what life is all about.

the shaman to be's direct experiences of the sacred knowledge comes at this time.

shamanism is a vocation which is a quest for knowledge and most practitioners do not learn all they have to learn overnight.

ecstasy is a learned art since knowledge cannot be separated from spiritual and emotional feelings.

along with the quest for knowledge must remain a sensitivity to experience and perceptions that cannot be explained

one needs this altered consciousness to carry out certain tasks which would otherwise be impossible.

for example one in this state, w/o previous experience, may compose songs, see into the future, foretell events, see into a body or an illness, and even fly (leaving the body behind).

this astral projection is used when someone has "lost their soul" and the shaman must seek out the soul possible in this manner.

if the shaman cannot control their strengths or spirit helpers, they will have problems carrying out their practice as a shaman.

the shaman is able to obtain many different perspectives on the world, from seeing over great geographical distances, to seeing within a plant or the movement of the wind.

the shaman travels inward as well and learns the way human beings operate inside their minds and bodies. originally the shaman was an all around sacred practitioner--a mystic, doctor, herbalist, diagnostician, hunter, dancer, singer, storyteller, artist and person of knowledge.

in western terms the shaman is a philosopher, surgeon, priest, magician, a botanist and a psychologist.

only recently has western science begun to acknowledge the skills and knowledge of shamans.

knowing the order and structure of things.

the spirit helpers of shamans are often animal and bird spirits, and sometimes plant spirit helpers.

the shaman wants to carry on the ancient ways of speaking with the animals and plants and knowing their "language"

the shaman seeks to learn the ways of the world and their own particular spirit helper aids the shaman in knowing its own particular style--with the eyes of an eagle, with the smell of a deer, the quickness of a fox, for example.

to diagnose the cause of an illness or the 'imbalance' the shaman uses the technique of "seeing"

this may take the form of seeing the bodies system as different colors, intensities of light, shadows, or other signs.

the shaman is also able to see if there is anything inside the patient that is foreign to it--or if the patient has poor circulation. this area is specialized and often called "one who sees." in native societies.

the shaman is also able to tell where the patient has deviated from the principles of creation.

the shaman uses this information obtained by seeing to prescribe a cure.

the shaman can affect change in the patient's normal bodily functions. can make changes, arebalances or open up some blocked area in the body so that the patient can actually cure themself with the assistance of the shaman.

what do shamans see when they seek to diagnose the cause of an illness or imbalance?

they see the order and the structure of things

they see this much the same way western science talks about atoms and molecules.

once you know the order and structure of a thing you will know its true name.

when you know its name it is yours to use so you can speak with whatever it is.

one of the tasks of the shaman is to diagnose and help reorder the elements in the body and perhaps the surrounding environment to which every human is connected and related.

for example, shamans know songs which will weaken and lure disease from the body, or will weaken

animals and lure them to the hunters. even to make good weather, and other purposes.

the power of these songs is that the true name of the disease, animal or whatever is contained in them

today the balance between the human community and the animal and plant community has been compromised.

people are now using technology along with the old ways.

as the people have been introduced to and begun to use new technology with which to cope with environmental conditions, or in order to compete with outsiders, the role of the shaman in the community has also changed from that of a central religious figure to a technical specialist.

in some cases the shaman has been viewed with mistrust because of government and missionary activity which have worked to arouse people's suspicions about the worth and quality of shamans and other ceremonial practitioners activities.

one of the central changes has been the loss of natural areas where spirit powers could, in the past, be encountered or where herbs and other medicines could be obtained.

in order to keep the people's trust and maintain the dignity in their work shamans must be servants to the people

to conclude, one of the new roles of the shaman today in native american communities is to figure out how to maintain this source of sacred knowledge in the midst of modern life.

"Before" does not outstrip Him,
"after" does not interrupt Him
"of" does not vie with Him for precedence
"from" does not accord with Him
"to" does not join with Him
"in" does not inhabit Him
"when" does not stop Him
"if" does not consult with Him
"over" does not overshadow Him
"under" does not support Him

"opposite" does not face Him
"with" does not press Him
"behind" does not limit Him
"previous" does not display Him
"after" does not cause Him to pass away
"all" does not unite Him
"is" does not bring Him into being
"is not" does not deprive Him from Being.
Concealment does not veil Him
His pre-existence preceded time,
His being preceded non-being,
His eternity preceded limit.

If thou sayest 'when', His existing has outstripped time;
If thou sayest 'before', before is after Him;
If thou sayest 'he', 'h' and 'e' are His creation;
If thou sayest 'how', His essence is veiled from description;
If thou sayest 'where', His being preceded space;
If thou sayest 'ipseity' (ma huwa), His ipseity (huwiwah) is
apart from things.

Other than He cannot be qualified by two (opposite) qualities at
one time; yet With Him they do not create opposition.
He is hidden in His manifestation, manifest in His concealing.
He is outward and inward, near and far; and in this respect He is
removed beyond the resemblance of creation.
He acts without contact,

instructs without meeting,
guides without pointing.

Desires do not conflict with Him,
thoughts do not mingle with Him:

His essence is without qualification (takyeef),
His action without effort (takleef).

Al Hallaj (A.D. 858- 922)

[From: Arberry, A.J., The Doctrine of the Sufis,
Publisher: Lahore, Sh Muhammad Ashraf 1966]

mohsen