

## NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS: INDIANS OF THE PLAINS

The Plains region, an area delineated by the Rocky Mountains on the west; the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba on the north; the Mississippi River on the east; and the Gulf of Mexico on the south, is home to philosophies, traditions, and ways of life that are some of the most varied and complex in the United States. The Great Plains measure 1,125,000 square miles, roughly equal to one-third the landmass of the United States, and serves as home for more than fifty American Indian nations, sometimes referred to as bands, tribes, and confederacies, representing significant linguistic, cultural, and traditional diversity. This complexity also is reflected in the extensive geo-ecological diversity and biodiversity of the region.

Some American Indian groups who currently occupy areas of the Plains do not consider this region their ancestral homeland as bestowed by the Creator. Over thirty American Indian groups were removed to the Oklahoma Territory as part of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, signed into law by Andrew Jackson. Removal was enforced first for Indian communities east of the Mississippi in the southeastern portion of the United States, including Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, and Chickasaw. Later, groups in the Plains region also were subject to removal, including the Pawnee, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Comanche. Between 1830 and 1843 more than 100,000 Native Americans were relocated to the Oklahoma Territory. During the long march to Oklahoma, which was enforced by the U.S. military, many thousands died, including over a third of the Cherokee people who were removed. This horrific event is often referred to as the Cherokee "Trail of Tears," but all of the Native Nations removed remember this time with great sadness.

**LANGUAGE DIVERSITY.** Today, the Plains region is one of the most linguistically diverse areas in the United States as far as American Indian languages are concerned. It is the ancestral homeland of linguistic groups that include speakers of Algonquian, Athapascan, Caddoan, Kiowa-Tanoan, Salish, Siouan, and Uto-Aztecan languages, whose languages reflect cultures and traditions associated with the natural world. Because of forced removal, some American Indian languages are represented in Oklahoma that historically were not found in the Plains region, such as Muskogean and Euchee. In all communities, stories and narratives in the language of the Peoples, often referred to as "Heritage Language," provides the context for cultural and traditional knowledge.

The American Indian Languages Act of 1994 was intended to provide Native students with the opportunity to study and learn their heritage language. Elders who speak these languages have much information to impart, not only about vocabulary and grammar, but also about kinds of knowledge, worldviews, and the ways in which utterances construct their lives. Intensive efforts to document conversations among fluent speakers are underway in many tribal communities, at tribal colleges, and at four-year institutions in an effort to preserve the heritage languages. In most cases, the urgency of these linguistic efforts is pressing because many heritage language speakers are elderly, and with each successive generation fewer people are learning the languages. This is one of the devastating results of forced schooling, missionization, and assimilation measures. Although language education is working to increase the number of fluent speakers, currently the number of heritage language speakers in all groups remains small. Of twenty-seven Native American languages spoken in Oklahoma today, only four are learned from childhood.

Linguists identify more than ten different language families and language isolates in the Plains region. These include:

1. *Algonquian*, largely spoken by groups along the Atlantic Coast, but also spoken by woodlands and northern Plains groups such as Cree, Ojibwe (or Ojibwa), Anishinaabeg, Chippewa, and Ottawa in Wisconsin, Michigan, and the northern Great Lakes region. Algonquian-language-speaking groups include Northern Arapaho of Wyoming and Southern Arapaho of Oklahoma; Atsina or Gros Ventre of the Prairies; the Blackfoot Confederacy, comprising Siksika, Kainah (Blood), and Piegan; Northern Cheyenne (in Montana) and Southern Cheyenne (in Oklahoma); Menominee (in Michigan and Wisconsin); Potawatami and Sauk and Fox (originally from Michigan, now also in Wisconsin, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Kansas); and Blackfoot (in the northern Plains and Alberta).
2. The *Athapascan-Apachean* branch, represented by Lipan Apache (whose original homeland is part of what is now southwestern Texas); Kiowa Apache in Oklahoma; and Mescalero, Chiricahua, and Jicarillo Apache in Arizona and New Mexico.
3. *Caddoan*, represented by Arikara (in North and South Dakota); Caddo (originally in Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas, but removed to Oklahoma); Pawnee (originally in Nebraska, but removed to Oklahoma); and Wichitas (in Kansas and Oklahoma).
4. *Kiowa-Tanoan*, represented on the Plains by only one tribe, the Kiowa, who now live in Oklahoma. This language family is also represented in New Mexico and Arizona by Pueblo peoples who are speakers of the Tewa, Tiwa, and Towa languages.
5. *Muskogean*, represented by Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples (originally in Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky,

and Tennessee; after forced removal also in Oklahoma); Creek (Muskogee), including Seminole (originally in Alabama, Georgia, and Florida; after forced removal also in Oklahoma).

6. *Salish*, represented in the northwestern Plains region by Salish-Kootenai, Spokane-Kalispel-Flathead, and Coeur d'Alene, whose ancestral homeland includes Idaho, Montana, and Washington, as well as parts of what is now southern Canada.
7. *Siouan*, by far the largest group on the Plains, represented by Assiniboine, also known in Canada as Stoney; Crow (Absaroka) in Montana; a subdivision of the Siouan family known as Deghiha, comprising Kansa (Kaw), Omaha, Osage, Ponca, and Quapaw, all of whom live in Oklahoma; Hidatsa (Gros Ventre); Iowa, Oto, and Missouri, who form a linguistic subdivision called Chiwere and who reside in Oklahoma; Mandan, who share a reservation with Arikara and Hidatsa in North Dakota; Hochunk (Winnebago); Dakota (Santee) in Minnesota, Nebraska, and parts of the Dakotas; Lakota, primarily in the western Dakotas; and Nakota or Yankton, primarily in the eastern Dakotas. The Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa are referred to as the Three Affiliated Tribes. The Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota are conventionally known as the "Sioux," a pejorative term loosely translated as "snakes in the grass," continues to be employed in the literature and in everyday speech.
8. *Tonkawan*, represented exclusively by Tonkawa in Oklahoma.
9. *Uto-Aztecan*, the speakers of which are found in a wide area of western North America and northwest Mexico. Currently represented in the Plains by Comanche originally from the southern Plains and now in Oklahoma; Shoshoni (in Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, and Utah); and Ute-Southern Paiute (in Utah, Colorado, California, and Nevada).
10. *Euchee (Yuchi)*, a language isolate, spoken by only a few remaining elders. Euchee people were moved from their homeland in Georgia to Oklahoma during the period of forced removal.

In addition to these spoken languages, Plains tribes used sign language, which facilitated trade by permitting people speaking diverse languages to communicate with each other.

**CULTURAL DIVERSITY.** Plains Indian nations present cultural diversity and complexity as well as linguistic diversity, and display significant cultural variation and resiliency—yet similarities exist. Philosophy and values acknowledge a holistic view of life that is cyclic in nature, representing unity and equality for all members. Concepts are interconnected and unified throughout all aspects of life including art, literature, music, language, social organization, religious traditions, law, and the environment. This integrated approach is thought to make life more satisfying and fulfilling.

Plains Indian communities document continuous habitation of the region for thousands of years through their his-

stories and "stories of the people," and archaeologists as well have found evidence that supports human habitation for more than twelve thousand years. With the introduction and diffusion of the horse in the seventeenth century, the number of equestrian groups whose economy was based on buffalo hunting increased. Those most recognized as nomadic include, among northern peoples, the Absaroka, Assiniboine, Cheyenne, Gros Ventre, and Lakota; and, among southern peoples, the Arapaho, Comanche, and Kiowa. Some river valley and northern woodlands peoples maintain aspects of their traditional horticultural way of life. For example, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara on the northern high Plains, and Pawnee, Cree, Iowa, and Deghiha speakers on the southern Plains, as well as Shoshone and Ute in the western mountains, established traditions and worldviews significantly different from those of the more nomadic peoples. In the past, river valley and woodlands peoples lived in earth lodges, tilled the soil near their homes, and maintained agriculturalist and agrarian lifestyles. The more nomadic peoples lived most of the year in more portable housing, such as tipis, and transportation was by horse and dog travois over land and by round-shaped bullboats over water.

The most common forms of burial on the Plains were scaffold and tree burials. The deceased were dressed in fine clothing and wrapped in a buffalo hide, then placed on a scaffold or tree and secured tightly. During the burial, close relatives prepared foods for the spirit's journey to the hereafter and placed necessary implements and objects for the spirit near the burial site. The Cree and Ojibwa, unlike some of the other Plains peoples, buried their dead in the ground and conducted an annual Feast of the Dead. As in times past, most Native peoples today are respectful of the spirit of the deceased, so burial grounds are considered sacred. Although some of the above-ground burial practices have changed, the traditional respect for the spirit and the practice of helping the spirit prepare for its journey remain.

Extensive contact, trading, sharing of resources, and competition among and between groups took place prior to white encroachment, and sharing and crossover of traditions likely occurred. This blending of traditions was accelerated, paradoxically, by various U.S. government measures, such as the Removal Act of 1830, which through forced relocation put previously separated groups into contact with one another. For many groups and contributed to a crossover of traditions. Even more destructive to the survival of Native cultures was a series of U.S. government measures aimed at assimilation and acculturation, or the outright theft of their land, most notably the Dawes Act (1887), the Curtis Act (1898), the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), the Relocation Program (1952), the Termination Act (1953), and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1975). However, with the civil rights and Red Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many American Indian nations increased cultural preservation efforts and began reviving and recovering their languages, traditions, and ceremonies, each culturally unique and significant.

**RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY.** Christian missionaries who proselytized throughout the Plains region were particularly Eurocentric in their response to Native religious beliefs, holding that Christianity provided a more bona fide religion than Native traditions and that conversion to Christianity was necessary to help the peoples become assimilated and acculturated. Many actively sought government sanctions and laws against the practice of Native traditions, and worked assiduously to eradicate Native beliefs. They also believed that Native religious practices were primitive and that the self-mortification practiced by some of the tribes was immoral. The U.S. government banned most religious traditions and ceremonies, including the Sun Dance, during the 1880s and specifically in 1894 through an act of Congress. On the northern Plains, however, the Sun Dance went underground and was maintained by medicine men and holy interpreters. This ceremony cautiously emerged into public view again only in 1934. Many Indian religious practices, however, remained underground or were lost during this time period until the Native American Religious Freedom Act of 1978. Although missionaries and Christian religions in general became more accepting of Native beliefs over time, many of the attitudes of the past persist, as evidenced by continuing missionary proselytizing and conversion efforts.

For most Indian nations, the terminology and constructs used to describe religion, religious practices, and ideas of the sacred do not translate from the Native language with the same meanings and connotations as in English and Western religious thought. For example, spirituality and a relationship to the sacred permeate daily life, and most Indian languages do not have specific terms for the word *religion*; likewise, the English word *religion* does not accurately encompass Native ways of life, beliefs, traditions, and ceremonies. Furthermore, the term *sacred* encompasses both individual and collective revitalization, as well as the knowledge gained through visionary experiences. Therefore, the descriptions of various aspects of Native religion presented below should serve only as illustrations of general concepts, and should not be understood as exact replications in English of Native meanings.

**PREVALENT TRADITIONS.** This category encompasses beliefs, practices, and roles that are characteristic of a number of Plains peoples, yet have elements that are particular to each group. It includes symbols such as the pipe, tobacco, the eagle, and a spirit known as the trickster; the role of spiritual leaders or interpreters, who often consider themselves “common men” with a gift, but not holy (referred to as medicine men, shamans, or ritual practitioners in anthropological literature); and primary religious practices and ceremonies such as the Sun Dance, the vision quest, and the sweat lodge.

**The pipe or calumet.** A symbol of Plains Indian communities, the long-stemmed pipe or calumet, is a medium for prayer. When people pray with the pipe, the smoke rising from the pipe carries their message to the Creator. In many communities, smoking the pipe is also a prelude to various

other ceremonies and activities. The pipe is smoked as a means of communicating with the spirits, as preparation for making a good decision, for thoughtfully considering one’s actions, and while deliberating on important topics of concern. Pipes can be made from a number of substances. Those made with a bowl fashioned from catlinite, a red stone found in Pipestone, Minnesota, are valued and distributed throughout the Plains. Because the pipe is a gift from the spirits and considered sacred and powerful, it is treated with respect. The bowl is made separately from the pipe stem, which is wood or, in some cases, pipestone. Some tribes consider it disrespectful to store the pipe with the bowl attached to the stem; consequently the two parts are separated when not in use. People are careful of the language they use around the pipe, and individuals who act as “pipe carriers” assume a great responsibility for acting on behalf of the community. Children are taught respect for the pipe from an early age. Showing disrespect to the pipe by stepping over it or dropping it is avoided. If such an incident occurs, prayers and cleansing ceremonies directed by someone identified as knowledgeable in this area are employed.

**Tobacco.** Several types of Indian tobacco are smoked in the pipe. Tobacco is considered sacred and is spoken to as a spirit that is alive. It is sometimes wrapped in small pieces of cloth, called “prayer or tobacco ties,” and used as offerings for honoring the spirits. Among the Crow (Absaroka), various types of tobacco historically were cultivated and traded with both European and Indians alike. Crow people consider tobacco important to their welfare and developed “tobacco societies” inspired by the visions and dreams of individuals. Members are given the task of overseeing the planting and harvesting of the crops. In times past, both men and women belonged. Specific songs, dances, and ceremonies are associated with tobacco societies, most of which are known only to members. For the Crow as well as other Plains nations, tobacco is viewed as medicine, bestowed by the spirits that brings the gift of power.

**The eagle.** The eagle is regarded as the most significant of all birds because of its great strength, prowess, hunting ability, and capacity to see. This bird is believed to be a messenger to and from the Creator or Great Spirit, and it assists humans in communicating with the spirits. Through the smoke that is emitted from the pipe, the eagle carries the smoke—that is, the prayers and supplications of humans—to the Great Spirit. Eagle feathers are prized for ceremonial purposes because of the bird’s qualities and powers. They are bestowed on individuals deemed worthy on the basis of some act or supplication, or as a marker when an individual is moving through a life transition.

The Hidatsa are known for their ability to trap eagles. Eagle trapping is regarded as both a sacred and a dangerous event. In the past, late in the fall, eagle trappers would build a camp a mile or so from the village. High atop the hills each trapper dug a pit about three feet deep and covered it with grass and twigs to form a blind. Using a rabbit or small fox

for bait, the trapper climbs into the pit and waits for an eagle to soar overhead and spot the bait. When the eagle lands on top of the pit, the trapper thrusts his hands upward and grabs the eagle by its legs, pulling it down into the pit and strangling it. After the feathers are secured, there is a ceremony in which the eagle's body is buried and offerings are made in thanks to its spirit.

**The trickster.** The trickster image figures prominently in Plains oral traditions as a humorous comic spirit, mediator between the spirits and humankind, and significant part of cultural identity. The trickster is admired for taking risks, and for transforming and breaking rules, yet also is held up as an example of what not to do. The trickster goes by a number of names, such as *Iktomi* (spider) among the Lakota; *Manabozho* (the compassionate trickster) among the Anishinaabeg; Great White Hare among the Algonquian speakers; Rabbit among the Seminole; and Old Man or Coyote among the Crow. In creation stories, the trickster teaches humans about culture after the establishment of the earth. He also is the principal character in a cycle of morality stories in which positive values are taught through negative example—that is, the hero always makes mistakes and demonstrates poor judgment. Children are told the stories to ensure that they grow up to be good people and do not behave like the trickster.

**Spiritual leaders or interpreters.** Most Plains traditions include community members who are spiritual leaders or interpreters for the spirits. Each leader or interpreter is well known in the community for his or her specialization in healing, prayer, or communication with the spirits, and this role is considered a gift from the spirits that is demanding, requiring many hours of service. Acceptance of responsibility for using the gift to the best of their ability is critical to the lives of spiritual leaders and to the lives of people in the community. For many Plains groups, the spiritual leader may be someone who the spirits have given the power to act as an interpreter. Sometimes, they are given the power to cure illness with the help of spirits or by ritual means, such as singing, dancing, or praying. Other times, they act as specialists in herbal curing.

Spiritual leaders differ according to the specific type of knowledge they have gained from the spirits and through visions. Although *shaman* and *medicine man* are general terms applied by scholars and others to a range of spiritual leaders, in each Native language specific and discrete terms are used to identify these individuals. For example, in Lakota, some of these leaders are known as *wocekiya wicasa* or *wapiya wicasa*, men of prayer, intercessors to the spirits, or “one who fixes.” Public and private ceremonies directed by spiritual leaders take many forms, since they are conducted and performed according to the instructions received by the interpreter. The spiritual leader is usually paid for his services in food, money, or other necessities, although most indicate that payment is not required.

Spiritual leaders and interpreters are consulted in a variety of circumstances and involved in a range of activities, such as healing the sick, advising in family matters, naming children, conducting ceremonies, praying for an individual's welfare, and interpreting visions. In formal ceremonies such as the Sun Dance, the interpreter serves as an intermediary between the people and the spirits, and as someone who provides exclusive and extensive knowledge of the cosmological mysteries. Often, this knowledge is reflected in the use of a sacred language, one that is only understood by the spirits and other interpreters or medicine men.

The Plains Cree and Ojibwe brought a number of ceremonies from their Great Lakes homeland. One ceremony, probably related to the ceremonies of the Midewiwin or “Great Medicine society” in the Great Lakes, includes a practitioner (or leader) who is bound hand and foot and placed in a tipi. During the ceremony, spirits enter the tipi, untie the practitioner, and teach him how to cure the sick and find lost articles. Sometimes the tipi shakes while the practitioner is being untied. On the northern Plains among the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Lakota, and others a similar tradition exists. For Lakota, *Yuwipi* is the term for a curing ceremony held in a darkened room with a *yuwipi* man who is completely wrapped in a blanket and securely tied with ropes. At the end of the ceremony, the spirits have healed the individual and untied the *yuwipi* man.

**The Sun Dance.** An important religious ceremony of the Plains is the Sun Dance, often participated in to offer one's suffering as sacrifice so that others may not suffer. Each participant makes a commitment that necessitates humility, respect, and supplication. The ceremony is usually performed during the summer months. Men and women make vows to participate in the ceremony throughout the year (or during previous years; commitments can be for four consecutive years). They dance for several days (the number of which varies according to the tradition) gazing at the sun, or more precisely, in the direction of the sun. It is useful to note that the Sun Dance is held also in cloudy and even rainy weather, and may be performed at night during the time of a full moon. In fact, in Lakota there is no distinction between the words for sun and moon; both are called *wi*, and the only way to differentiate between them is by the use of a qualifier: the sun is known as “day *wi*” and the moon as “night *wi*.” Thus a phrase translated as “to gaze at the sun” cannot necessarily be linguistically differentiated from “to gaze at the moon,” although conventionally the current translation always refers to the sun.

The Mandan Sun Dance, called *Okipa*, traditionally was held indoors in the tribe's medicine lodge, and typically lasted four days. During this time, the dancers are suspended from the lodge rafters. In other tribes, the Sun Dance is held outdoors within a defined sacred space at the center of a large circular arena that is surrounded by a shade arbor. The medicine man uses skewers or eagle claws to pierce the chest or back muscles of the male dancers who are prepared and in

“the right frame of mind” for participation. Then, the skewers are attached to rawhide thong ropes that are tied to a sacred center pole. The dancers pull backward until they break free, thus releasing themselves from the thongs. According to Lakota philosophy, the only thing that one can offer to the Great Spirit is one’s own body, because it is the only thing that a human being really owns. The Sun Dance allows such an offering to be made, and its ritual of suffering and release from suffering is offered as a service to the people.

The Blackfeet Sun Dance differs inasmuch as a woman, known for her industry, leads the dancers and bears the title “medicine woman.” Although she does not go through the physical practices that her male counterparts do, she participates in a number of ceremonies that precede the actual dance. She presides over two important ceremonies: the Buffalo Tongues ceremony and the sweat lodge ceremony. Before the Sun Dance, people are asked to bring buffalo tongues to a certain lodge erected for this purpose. The tongues are ceremoniously skinned, cleaned, boiled, and then distributed. A sweat lodge is constructed from one hundred willow saplings that are placed in the ground and tied together at the top. The dancers fast and join in the sweat lodge before dancing.

**The vision quest.** The vision quest, or “dream seeking,” is an essential part of Plains Indian conceptual and linguistic worldview, which is very much focused on dreaming and dream experiences. The ideas behind the vision quest are based in experiential processes that are broadly similar for many Native peoples, but that vary in specific detail depending on the tradition. Dream seeking is considered a mythic discourse incorporated into an intentional structure and regarded as a primary source of knowledge and power. The context of the vision, the knowledge that is gained, and the type of vision are unique to each individual. Some have described the experience as a merging of the dreaming and waking state that provides the seeker with knowledge and awareness. It is an intentional act, a search for power and explicit contact with the sacred.

During the vision quest, a person, usually male, seeks to find their purpose within their community. The dreamer embarks upon an ordeal in isolation from the community. Under the direction of a medicine man, each dreamer is led to a hill or other secluded spot, where they stay for an agreed-upon number of days in constant prayer and fasting in an effort to receive a vision that will be useful for their life and the lives of community members. The Lakota notion of *wacinksapá* or “respectful attention” characterizes the dreamer’s attitude, concentration, and state of mind before, during, and after the ceremony. If a vision occurs, the dreamer may receive knowledge presented in experiential and imagistic forms; visions can be a vivid communication visualized as an animate form, an inanimate object, an idea, or a sensory experience. These communications from the spirits are treated with great care. The seeker may be instructed on how to maintain a connection to or awareness of the vision in order

to remain cognizant of the gift that has been given. These manifestations of the spirits and the sacred may be used in times of need as important knowledge given to the seeker for a specific purpose. Sometimes these manifestations are evidenced in the creation of a painting, with attention given to specific colors and shapes that signify the vision. Power and knowledge gained through a vision also can be recalled through an object used in a medicine bundle, or through prayers and songs acquired and learned during the vision. The seeker also might acquire a new name, receive a calling to act in service to the people or be given a task to perform or goal to be pursued. Guardians, helpers, or spirits may present themselves and provide the seeker with guidance. Interpretation of the vision may come soon after the experience in conversation with the medicine man or may not become available to the seeker until some time after the experience. In all cases, the purpose of the quest is to receive instructions about important actions, events, or opportunities that will affect the seeker’s life and, often, the life of the community.

**The sweat lodge.** The sweat lodge is regarded as a means of purifying individuals both physically and spiritually. Participation provides an opportunity to contemplate, pray for those in need, and enter into a sacred space. A small number of participants join together with a medicine man in a dome-shaped lodge constructed of saplings and covered with hides and blankets to make it airtight and dark. Some preparations are necessary prior to the ceremony. The lodge must be maintained, kept clean and ready for use, with rocks and wood collected. A fire for heating the stones is started and tended for a number of hours prior to the ceremony, and individuals who know the songs and can participate in the singing must be on hand. In the center of the lodge floor, a hole is dug into which the heated stones are ladled by the fire tender. The hides are secured firmly over the lodge and, closing the door flap, the medicine man sprinkles water over the heated stones, causing steam to fill the lodge. The participants perspire as they sing and pray together, asking for help from the spirits who come into the lodge and praying for the welfare of the people. Frequently, a sweat lodge is conducted as a prefatory or cleansing ritual, or before undertaking a vision quest or other religious ceremony. Sometimes the focus of prayers is for the healing of specific individuals who suffer from mental, physical, or spiritual illness.

**INTERTRIBAL AND DIFFUSED TRADITIONS.** The Ghost Dance and the Native American Church provide examples of beliefs and rituals that are acknowledged as intertribal and diffused traditions, and that are not limited specifically to Plains peoples.

**The Ghost Dance.** Between 1869 and the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, a pacifistic movement called the Ghost Dance spread throughout the Plains. Participants in the dance sought to fight against white domination and sing the spirits of the ancestors back to life. It is often associated with the Earth Lodge Cult, begun around the same time, which called for the destruction of whites in a cataclysmic

event. The Ghost Dance began when Wovoka, a Paiute prophet, had a vision in which he was instructed that if Native peoples retained their ways, danced, and prayed for a further vision, then the whites would disappear and all the relatives who had died, including the four-legged ones such as the buffalo, would return. In his vision, Wovoka said he visited with the spirits of the deceased, and they taught him a dance that would bring about these events. Talk of the vision spread across the Plains and prompted people to participate in an effort to restore lost relatives and the traditional way of life. The dancers performed for long periods of time until they fell to the ground. When they awoke, they talked and sang of meetings with their dead relatives and of how happy they were that the old way of life would soon return.

The prophet's vision and the Ghost Dance emerged out of a time of desperation, intense suffering, starvation, death, and loss of a way of life for Native peoples. The return of relatives did not come during Wovoka's time or at the height of the movement. Instead, the federal government, fearing that the dance would serve to engender hostilities, ordered all dancing stopped. On December 29, 1890, a band of peaceful peoples fleeing persecution were surrounded at Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Reservation. For allegedly participating in the dance, and out of fear of Indian community revitalization, over three hundred disarmed Lakota men, women, and children from Chief Big Foot's Mnicoujou band were massacred. This event has served as a marker for the end of the Ghost Dance movement and the Plains Indian wars. However, Native American scholars acknowledge that the principles behind the Ghost Dance movement continue to be evidenced today in Native communities through the recognition of the importance of the past, assessments of current conditions in Indian communities, personal commitments to taking action against existing conditions, and visions of a better life in the future. Furthermore, some Native scholars believe that the prayers of the Ghost Dancers are coming true today because the white man is leaving the Great Plains and the buffalo are coming back. In this, the buffalo are considered to be an agent in the restoration of their way of life.

**The Native American Church.** An intertribal religion established well over 7,000 years ago that spread across the Plains at the turn of the twentieth century is the Native American Church, also known as the "Peyote Road." Long before Columbus arrived in the New World, the Native peoples of Mexico were using a plant from the cactus family in their religious ceremonies. The Aztecs called it *peyotl*, a term that refers to a number of plants with elements that produce hallucinatory sensations when ingested in a green or dry state or in a tea. The Huichols of Mexico established a complex cultural life in relation to the use of peyote that includes a long history, dating back to before 200 CE, of pilgrimages to gather peyote and care for the peyote fields. They believe peyote to be the heart, soul, and memory of the Creator, given to them so that they could learn about relationships

and respect. Likewise, peyote (*Lophophora williamsii* Le-Maire) is regarded by members of the Native American Church as a sacred plant, a sacrament, and a gift from the Great Spirit that may be consumed for the welfare of the people during prayer meetings.

The peyote plant, whose "buttons" contain the hallucinogen mescaline, is found in Mexico and Texas on both banks of the Rio Grande. From the tribes of Mexico, the plant itself and certain ceremonies associated with it diffused northward to the Comanche, Apache, Tonkawa, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, and ultimately to other surrounding tribes. Some credit Quanah Parker, a Comanche leader, with bringing Half Moon-style peyote meetings to the southern Plains. After being injured while traveling south, he was cured by a Lipan Apache *curandera* who practiced the sacred use of peyote.

The Peyote Road or Road of Life has been influenced by Christianity as well as individual tribal beliefs; thus there are minor differences in the ceremonies from one church meeting to another. There are two major divisions, analogous to denominations: the Half Moon, by far the most popular and freer of Christian influences, and the Big Moon (also known as Cross Fire). The rituals of the two divisions differ somewhat, the greatest ideological difference being that Big Moon uses the Bible in its ceremonies and does not always employ tobacco as a catalyst for prayer. Members of both divisions pray to Jesus Christ, equate the consumption of the peyote button with the sacrament of Holy Communion, and espouse basic tenets of Christian churches in their prayers and songs. If all members attending a meeting are from the same tribe, it is likely that one Native language will be used. If members from several tribes gather together, often English is used, and the songs are sung in a variety of Native languages, many in Diné (Navajo) and Lakota. The content and form of meetings are decided by "the peyote roadman," and despite variations, there are some features, customs, and practices that are common to all.

Peyote meetings are held on Saturday nights, usually from sundown to sunup on Sunday. They take place in traditionally shaped tipis made from canvas, which are conscientiously erected for the occasion and dismantled after a meeting is concluded. To insure the proper attitude of respect, great care and attention is paid to all details including beadwork, paintings, and the creation of the altar. The doorway of the tipi faces east, and in the center of the tipi a fireplace is built, behind which is a crescent-shaped earthen altar. On top of the altar is placed a large peyote button called Father, or Chief, Peyote. Between the fire and the altar is another crescent made from ashes. Between the fireplace and the doorway of the tipi are placed food and water that later will be ceremonially consumed.

The principal leaders of the meeting are assigned special seats inside the tipi. The peyote "roadman," or "road chief," sits directly opposite the doorway, in what is for most Plains tribes the traditional seat of honor. To his left sits the cedar

chief, and next to the doorway sits the fire boy. To the right of the roadman sits the drum chief, the keeper of the special drum used in the ceremony. The drum chief is entrusted with keeping a commercially made three-legged brass kettle over which he stretches a hide. The kettle is partially filled with water to regulate the tone, and the hide is tied to the kettle by a rope in such a manner that when the tying is complete the rope forms an outline of a six-pointed star, called the “morning star,” on the underside of the drum. Each person has his own drumstick, usually carved out of the same wood as the staff and gourd handle also used in the ceremony. The rest of the congregation is interspersed between the ritual leaders around the perimeter of the tipi. If a Bible is used it is placed between the earth altar and the roadman.

Each member has their own ritual belongings that are stored in a “feather box,” typically rectangular and made of wood and often decorated with inlaid silver or with painted designs, including representations of the crescent moon, the tipi, a stylized version of a water turkey (*Anbinga anbinga*), a star, and utensils used in the ceremony. The box usually contains a “loose fan,” so called because the feathers are not set rigidly into the handle; a large Father Peyote; a staff—constructed in three sections from a rare wood such as ebony (in Christian-influenced meetings this is often called the “staff of life”)—and sometimes a gourd rattle; and an arrow with a blunt head; all (except for the peyote itself) are symbols of peace. Most peyotists wear a blanket made of red and blue material, usually a copy of old-time wool cloth received from traders. The red is symbolic of day, the blue of night.

Peyote meetings are generally held to pray for the welfare of the people. They also may be conducted for special purposes such as curing ceremonies, birthday celebrations, funerals, or memorial services, or when people leave the community to travel great distances or return from the armed services. Someone wishing to initiate and participate in the ceremony formally asks for a meeting to be conducted and offers tobacco to a roadman. When a meeting is scheduled, participants arrive at the home of the sponsor, who provides all the peyote buttons for consumption during the meeting, as well as the food that will be shared by the participants at the conclusion of the ceremony. At dusk the roadman asks all who wish to pray for a good life for their families and others to follow him into the tipi. The roadman places Father Peyote upon the altar and the cedar chief sprinkles needles on the fire. Often, cigarettes made from cornhusks and tobacco are rolled and passed around the circle of participants. When the ritual smoking has ended, the ashes of the cigarettes are collected and placed near the altar. Sage is passed around and each member rubs sage on his hands, arms, and face, or chews pieces of it. Next the peyote buttons are passed around and each member takes four of them. At this point the singing begins.

The peyote chief takes some sage, the staff, and the gourd rattle and tells the drum chief to begin. As the drum resounds, the peyote chief sings the opening song of the cere-

mony. This is sung four times, and when he finishes, each member in turn eats some of the peyote buttons and sings four songs. The man to the right of the singer plays the drum while the singer shakes the gourd rattle. In this manner the ritual of eating and singing progresses around the tipi clockwise. Concurrent with the visionary experience, during meetings there is a feeling of closeness with God. The praying, eating of peyote, and singing continue until midnight, when the fire boy informs the peyote roadman of the time and leaves the tipi to get a bucket of water. He returns with the water for the roadman, who dips a feather into the bucket and splashes water on the people. After smoking and praying, the water is passed around to the members so that each may drink. During this part of the meeting another standard song is sung. After the water drinking, the bucket is removed and the singing and drumming continue.

Before each major segment of the meeting, the cedar chief burns incense and the members purify themselves and their belongings in the smoke. The ceremony lasts until dawn, when the morning-water woman is called into the lodge bearing another bucket of water. She is usually a relative of the peyote chief, who now sings the dawn song. The roadman smokes and prays and may doctor those who are ill or pray for the welfare of the people. After the ceremonial water drinking, the woman retrieves the bucket and leaves the tipi. The peyote chief then sings the “quittin’ song” while the morning-water woman prepares the traditional breakfast consisting of water, corn, fruit, and meat.

Many missionaries frown on participation and membership in the Native American Church, despite its Christian aspects. Yet, it has become increasingly popular among many tribes, currently having approximately 300,000 members. In 1965 the Federal Drug Administration classified peyote as a controlled substance, and there has been a great deal of controversy over Indians’ use of the plant in their religious meetings. Yet neither the legal issues nor the implication of immorality on the part of whites has prevented the Native American Church from becoming an important religious movement in the United States and Canada. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978) guaranteed protection of religious rights for Native Americans, including the right to use peyote. However, church members were still liable to prosecution for possession. It was not until the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993) and, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling regarding the transportation of peyote in 1994 (see Smith and Snake) that members of the Native American Church were guaranteed the right to both use peyote during ceremonies and transport it from the gathering fields across state lines.

**ADDITIONAL PHILOSOPHY.** Ideas of the sacred, as well as proscriptions against what is forbidden or profane, are unique to each nation and community. Many Native peoples describe their histories and the contexts of their ceremonies as particular to time and place and originating from specific events or through the mentorship of a prophet or holy per-

son, someone who brings the ceremonies to the people for their continued well-being. Both states, the sacred and profane, may be changed through the intercession of the spirits and the mediation of prayer, song, and dance to strengthen the community by contact with the spirits. Aspects of the sacred and profane can be changed through this intercession. The idea of the holy is often expressed in Native terms such as *Wakan* (Lakota), Algonquian variants of *Manitu*, *Xube* (Ponca), *Wakonda* (Omaha), and *Puba* (Comanche). All animate and inanimate objects serve as evidence of the sacred. The rituals employed to transform persons or objects from a profane state to a sacred one have frequently, but erroneously, been called “medicine,” or “making medicine”; likewise, the source of a medicine man’s personal power is kept in a “medicine bundle.” Medicine, however, is a term encompassing sacred power in all its revelations.

**The supernatural.** In each Native language, power and sacredness are distinguished from each other. Certain English-language renderings of Native terms, such as *Great Mystery* and *Great Spirit*, seem to refer to a single creator or prime mover, and this led Christians to falsely ascribe to Native Americans a belief in a monotheistic god prior to European contact. However, there is no empirical evidence for this belief, and today terms such as *Supreme Being* or *Mysterious Being* are usually acknowledged as designating the totality of all supernatural beings and powers, as well as “a Power” greater than the individual. Various terms in Native languages reference the idea of the “great holy,” including *Behä’tixtch*, “the Leader of All” (Gros Ventre); *Wakantanka*, most often translated as “Great Mystery” or “Great Spirit” (Lakota); and *Mahópiní*, “inexplicable power” (Mandan). Often symbols are used to designate important spirits associated with star phenomena, and the Great Mystery may be addressed as the Sun or Morning Star, or as a terrestrial counterpart, Mother Earth. These references are significant since Plains peoples are avid and accurate astronomers and geographers who carefully note the cyclic nature of the stars and planets.

Often, prohibitions associated with intercourse, menstruation, and food—prominent on the Plains as in a number of traditions and cultures—have been misinterpreted and misconstrued. For example, previously in the anthropological literature, restrictions on menstruating women were interpreted as degrading toward women. It is more accurate, however, to see women’s isolation and separation as related to issues of power and access to power. Women are seen as powerful particularly during times of fertility because of their ability to create life. (From the time a woman begins to menstruate she is seen as having the power to create life, regardless of the time of her specific cycle.) Men protect their power by not associating with women during this time in a woman’s cycle, and rather than originating in a view of menstruation as “taboo,” the proscriptions associated with avoidance of menstruating women reflect reverence for power inherent in women and the sacred nature of life.

**The hereafter.** A belief that each person has more than one “spirit,” often equated with the Christian notion of “soul”—one that inheres in the living until death, another that corresponds to the notion of a ghost, as well as to other concepts—is common among Plains peoples. When someone dies, they travel along the path of the dead, associated with the Milky Way, toward their final destination located in the Southern Hemisphere. Death is respected as part of the path of life, and throughout one’s life there is meaning, purpose, and responsibility. Mourners may stay near a relative’s body for several days after death, and during funeral proceedings the deceased as well as the mourners are addressed. Women and men may show respect for those who have died by cutting their hair short or by acts of physical sacrifice that may include an attitude of mourning for a period of time. It also is customary for relatives to give away all of the deceased’s belongings. The Lakota mourn their dead for one year, sometimes through a special ceremony called Ghost Keeping in which a close relative keeps a lock of the deceased’s hair in a special bundle for one year. Each day during the year, the ghost (that is, the deceased’s spirit) is fed by the relative keeping the ghost. At the end of the year a farewell ceremony is held on the ghost’s behalf, relatives assemble for the last time, and the spirit is freed.

Belief in spirits is common among Plains Indians, and it is accepted that spirits are capable of advising humans about the welfare of the tribe. Medicine men may ask the advice of spirits on how to cure people, and spirits may predict certain events in the lives of the living. Spirits also are capable of finding lost or stolen articles, and in some cases of taking another life. It is commonly believed that when a person dies, the spirit may attempt to entice a close relative to join it in death. Spirits herald their presence in numerous ways, and some believe that the sound of a baby crying outside in the night, or of a wolf howling or rooster crowing, means a spirit is calling someone to die. Family members may fire guns to frighten away the spirit, or medicine men may burn incense with an aroma that is displeasing to spirits.

**Creation stories.** Plains peoples have developed comprehensive philosophies, religious systems, and sacred ways based on oral tradition and knowledge. Their origin or creation stories express complex truths about the histories of Native peoples, and the stories are used to educate children and to document the history of each nation.

Among Plains nations, the Pawnee provide an example of religious innovation, having established a comprehensive religious philosophy. Pawnee creation stories describe the creation of the world; the origin of animals, humans, and all other living things; and the power of the spirits. The Pawnee creation story tells of Tirawa, the Supreme Being, who was married to the “Vault of Heaven.” Purely spiritual beings with no physical shape, these two reigned somewhere in the heavens beyond the clouds. Tirawa sent his commands to humans through a number of spirits and messengers who manifested themselves to the Pawnees. Tcuperika (Evening



Star) is personified as a young maiden and is keeper of a garden in the West, the source of all food. She has four assistants, Wind, Cloud, Lightning, and Thunder, and is married to Oplikata (Morning Star), a strong warrior. From Tcuperika and Oplikata, the first human on earth was born. Other spirits include the four directions, the northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest, and the three spirits of the north: "North Star," chief of all stars; "North Wind," who gave the buffalo to humans; and Hikus (Breath), who gave life itself to the People. "Sun" and "Moon" were married and produced the second person on earth, whose marriage to the offspring of "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" gave rise to the human race. At the southern end of the Milky Way stood "Star of the South," and the campfires of the departed that received the spirits of the dead. Another star named Skiritihuts (Fool Wolf) became offended at one of the councils of star people and in revenge introduced death to the world of humans.

**The Hako.** Pawnee ceremonies include those dedicated to "Thunder," to "Morning Star," and to "Evening Star," practiced in connection to the planting and harvesting of Mother Corn as well as for the general welfare of the people. The Hako is performed to acknowledge relationships and a sense of responsibility between community members, and to ensure that community members enjoy long life, happiness, and peace. The *Ku'rabus* (elder, or "Man of Years"), who is venerated for his knowledge and experience, conducts the Hako. To him is entrusted the supervision of the songs and prayers, which must be performed precisely in the same order each time. The Hako is usually performed in the spring when birds are nesting or in the fall when they are flocking. Performers pray for the life, strength, and growth of the people.

Those taking part in the ceremony are divided into two groups: the fathers who sponsor the ceremony and the children who receive the focused intentions, prayers, and gifts from the fathers. The head of the fathers' group, called Father, is responsible for employing the *Ku'rabus*. The head of the children's group, called Son, acts on behalf of the other children. The most important objects used in the Hako are the sacred feathered wands resembling pipe stems without the bowls attached. In the past the ceremony took three days and three nights, during which time twenty-seven rituals were performed, each ritual and song unveiling sacred history and stories and cementing the relationships of fathers and children. At the end of the ceremony the wands are waved over the children, sealing the bond between fathers and children. Most of the ritual objects are discarded, with the exception of the feathered wands, which are given to one of the children for keeping. At a later date the children assume the fathers' role and offer prayers to another group of children, thus perpetuating the tradition and solidarity of the Pawnee. The children may also take the wands to other tribes as an offering of peace.

**Sacred Arrow Renewal.** The Sacred Arrow Renewal ceremony is an important one for the "People Like Us," re-

ferred to in English as the Cheyenne. The Cheyenne are closely related to "Our Own Kind of People," known as the Arapaho, and the creation story of both groups is closely guarded and considered sacred. The Cheyenne believe that long ago Maiyun, the Supreme Being, gave four sacred (medicine) arrows to their prophet, Sweet Medicine, in a cave located in the Black Hills of South Dakota. When Sweet Medicine gave the arrows to the People, one person was appointed Keeper of the Sacred Arrows. In 1833, according to Cheyenne histories, the Pawnee captured the Sacred Arrows and, as a result, difficulties befell the People. Although two of the arrows were returned, two substitutes remain in place of two other arrows that are still missing.

Maiyun instructed Sweet Medicine in the proper care of the arrows and the sacred ceremonies associated with them. Sweet Medicine was given the responsibility of teaching the Cheyenne about the powers of the arrows and their importance for the survival of the People. Sweet Medicine lived with the People for 446 years and provided them with instructions on ways to live; among other things he counseled them to form a representative government in which spiritual and medicine people are vested with the highest authority. He prophesied the coming of the white people, and of the misfortune, illness, death, and devastation that would befall the People with their arrival. Another prophecy described a prophet the People would meet named *So'taaeo'o* (Erect Horns), who later taught them the Sun Dance and other sacred traditions distinctive to the Cheyenne.

The Sacred Arrow Renewal ceremony traditionally takes four days to perform and occurs every other year. After the site has been chosen by a group of individuals (usually men held in high esteem), a special lodge is prepared on the first day. New poles are cut and the lodge covering is borrowed from families of good reputation. Inside the lodge the medicine people of the tribe sit on beds of sage. As part of the preparations, each Cheyenne family provides a special counting stick to the leader of the ceremony that symbolically represents each member of the tribe. An individual pledges to sponsor a Sacred Arrow Renewal ceremony, and the arrows are unwrapped and displayed. The man making the pledge does so to fulfill a vow. Although only one person makes the pledge, the ceremony is given on behalf of all Cheyenne, to protect against famine and annihilation and to ensure a long and prosperous life for all.

On the second day the sacred arrows are obtained from the keeper and the bundle is opened and examined. If the flight feathers of the arrows are in any way damaged, a man known for his bravery is chosen to replace the feathers. On the third day the arrows are renewed and each of the counting sticks is blessed on behalf of all the families in the tribe. On the last day the arrows are exhibited to the male members of the tribe. The Cheyenne say that it is difficult to look directly at the arrows because they give off a blinding light. To conclude the ceremony, the medicine people make predictions about the future of the People. With the conclusion of

a sweat lodge ceremony, the Sacred Arrow Renewal ritual is officially over, and the Cheyenne symbolically began life anew.

**SEE ALSO** Blackfeet Religious Traditions; Ghost Dance; Lakota Religious Traditions; Sun Dance; Tobacco; Wovoka.

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