

FIRST PEOPLES

NATIVE SPIRITUALITY

Join us Mondays through Nov. 28, 2005, as we take a look at the contributions — past and present — of Washington's First Peoples.

Since first contact, non-Indians have been confused, even downright antagonistic, about the spiritual practices of American Indians. They've had a difficult time understanding the spiritual practices of Native people that were so different from the religious practices they knew and observed. They were used to attending church and studying scripture — the Bible or the Torah. With Indian spiritual practices, nothing was written down. Oftentimes these practices were based in nature and, then as now, information was imparted on a “need to know basis.”

This was a dark time in the early years of the United States, purportedly founded on the principles of religious freedom, but in which Indian spiritual practices were completely banned by Congress. The ban was established in an attempt to “civilize” Indians, have them adopt non-Indian ways and beliefs, and assimilate into the non-Indian culture. Some Indians did assimilate, giving up their traditional practices. Others continued to practice their traditional ways despite threats of being jailed or even killed, forcing the practice of traditional spiritual beliefs “underground.”

It wasn't until 1976 that the **American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA)** was passed that native people were guaranteed the freedom to

practice their traditional religions. Unfortunately, the legislation was a non-binding Congressional resolution with no teeth to enforce the provisions of the resolutions. It omitted a “cause-of-action” to permit Native people to sue when their rights were violated.

Today, many Indian people believe that the Creator has given them original instructions — unique to their peoples — that they continue to follow and honor those instructions. The Lakota, Dakota and Nakota (more commonly known as the Sioux) conduct Sundance ceremonies each summer as well as other sacred ceremonies. The Haudenosaunee — the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy — have a number of culturally-specific spiritual practices including a well-known Thanksgiving prayer that's used on a daily basis.

It's believed that the ceremonies and songs must be conducted in an indigenous language in order for the Creator to hear them. A common belief shared across all nations, though, is that all life is sacred and nature is to be revered, including animals and the elements. This reverence for life and nature as well as the sanctity of the dead continues to be difficult for non-Indians to understand.

Washington state's First Peoples engage in their own unique spiritual and religious practices. Some are ancient like the Wa'shat Longhouse religion that flourishes today amongst the Confederated Tribes

and Bands of Yakama Nation and Upper Plateau peoples. The Longhouse plays an integral role as a place where marriages, funerals, gatherings and ceremonies are held. Important elements

of the religion also include the singing of sacred songs and reverence for the circle, unique to the Wa'shat religion. Other Native people around the Puget Sound gather for their ceremonies in a smokehouse which has its own unique practices, songs and ceremonies.

Some spiritual practices are newer and are a hybrid of traditional Indian beliefs coupled with mainstream religions. The Shaker Church is an example of this. The first Shaker Church, which is not related to the Shaker religion associated with Quakers, is located off Highway 101 near the Squaxin Island Tribe's reservation. Its roots are based on native beliefs but expanded to include the Bible.

Other older spiritual practices continue to be important. Many Native people living on reservations and in urban areas will also participate in sweat lodge ceremonies, also popular with non-Indians. A sweat lodge may be conducted co-ed or with only one gender. Rocks are heated in a fire until they are very hot and then are placed inside a small tent-like structure, heating it to a very hot temperature. Water is poured on the rocks, creating steam. The sweat lodge ceremony is used by a number of Native Nations for both physical and spiritual cleansing, for prayer, and to seek guidance and visions.

ACTIVITIES

- 1: As a class, discuss what the author means by “spiritual practices” and “religious practices.” What is the difference between them and how are they similar? Look through today's Seattle Times for images/articles that support the idea that either religion or spiritual practices are part of our community.
- 2: Using the information presented in the past few weeks of this series, what are some cultural traits significant to the Northwest's First Peoples? How do you know this? How do they compare to those cultural traits that define what it means to be an American from the United States? Look for images and articles in the newspaper to support your answer.



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CHAPTER 6:

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS