

Many Local Traditions

Summary: Native American traditions are diverse, but many share strong emphases on oral discourse, orientation toward the land, and the existence of a spirit world. Additionally, all Native traditions have had to respond to colonization, dispossession, and assimilation. Still, the traditions that developed prior to and in response to European colonization are markedly distinct.

Each Native American nation has its own distinctive life-ways, but they do share some characteristics. For example, most Native life-ways are primarily oral traditions, relying on the spoken transmission of story and the enactment of ritual knowledge. Precisely because they are not fixed in writing, Indigenous beliefs and practices are fluid. While written traditions promote remarkable fidelity to memory and “getting it right,” oral traditions can encompass a variety of interpretations and can change, developing fresh interpretations in changing circumstances. The fluidity of oral tradition explains, in part, why it can be so difficult to identify a single normative or authoritative belief system for any given Native tradition. Perhaps the same qualities that make it difficult to pin down a precise definition of Native traditions enable those traditions to survive dispossession and rapid social change.

Native religious traditions are on the whole land-based. They are oriented in profound ways toward living well and making a living on particular landscapes. To illustrate, consider how Native religious symbolism draws on the contours of the immediate natural world and how ethical values are derived from making a respectful, productive, and sustainable livelihood from that landscape. For the Tlingit people of the Northwest Coast, the salmon figures prominently in religious symbolism and provides one of the staple foods of existence. The ethical and ceremonial respect Tlingit people give the annual run of spawning salmon in the coastal rivers exemplifies the connection made between livelihood, food, spirit and land. For the Muscogee, or Creek, people of the Southeast and Oklahoma, much of ceremonial life is oriented around corn, its respectful cultivation, and gratitude for its bountiful harvest.

There are several other generalizations one could make that might hold true for a majority of Native peoples. Most Native American traditions share a vital interest in dream experience. They affirm the existence of a spirit world in a multitude of ways. They draw on the transformative power of music, dance, and symbol in their ritual and ceremonial life.

As tempting as it is to speak about a singular “Native American religion” on the basis of these common features, however, to do so would fail to do adequate justice to the fundamental distinctiveness, and sophistication, of each tradition. A more compelling way to think about the similarities of Native peoples is to consider the place they have come to share within the political, economic, and cultural boundaries that constitute the United States. While each tradition is profoundly rooted in its emergence from the very landscape which became America, all have shared the common challenges of life under colonization, especially dispossession and assimilation. So while traditional ways of life vary greatly, all Native communities have shared the common challenge of balancing those traditional ways of life with the changes necessary to survive in a new world on their own terms.

If one were to profile perhaps thirty or forty Native communities, one would begin to get a fuller view of the wide diversity of Native religious traditions. Despite the many similarities that obtain across traditions, it is perhaps best to evoke their fundamental diversity and richness by focusing on snapshots of the traditions of four peoples—the Ojibwe, the Mescalero Apache, the Lakota Sioux, and the Haudenosaunee Iroquois. In the experience of Native peoples today, there are also several intertribal phenomena that are widely shared across cultural boundaries, such as the Native American Church, the sweat lodge, and the powwow.