

Sacred Pipe of the Lakota Sioux

Summary: The Sioux, or Lakota, people of the American Great Plains are well known for their resistance to colonization and assimilation in the 1870s. Sacred pipe ceremonies of the Lakota Sioux are meant to provide spiritual grounding and power for Lakota as they navigate Native identity in the modern world.

The Sioux, or Lakota as they call themselves in the westernmost dialect, became the focus of the United States in the 1870s as their defiant will to resist colonization and assimilation on the Great Plains caught the imagination of American popular culture. Many historic Lakota leaders, like Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud, became well known for their fortitude, vision, and endurance in the face of armed American encroachment on lands set aside by treaties and in light of the extermination of the bison, so crucial to the traditional Lakota economy, culture, and religion. Today, their Lakota descendants face staggering poverty and the loss of much of their productive land base.

The sacred pipe plays a key role in Lakota spiritual and cultural life, and the symbolism and rituals of the sacred pipe provide a good point of entrance into the rich Lakota tradition. However, this ceremony is inseparable from the moral preparation and spiritual reflection that give it meaning in the whole context of Lakota life. Many Lakota and other Native peoples find offensive the popular non-Native notion that ceremonies, such as the sacred pipe ceremony, can be lifted out of context and performed for profit or as a therapeutic weekend diversion. The sacred pipe and its ceremonial use are integrally part of the wider context of Lakota life.

It is said that the pipe and instructions for its use were given to the people by White Buffalo Calf Woman, and the narrative by which the Lakota were taught to pray with the pipe by this messenger from the spiritual realm holds a paramount place in Lakota narrative tradition. Today, Arvol Looking Horse, a Lakota man living in South Dakota, is the 19th-generation keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe, which is integrally related to the fortune and well-being of the Lakota people. Other Lakotas are also pipe carriers—stewards entrusted with the care of particular ceremonial and personal pipes.

The intricacies of belief surrounding the pipe itself cannot be summed up in a few words. It is important to note, however, that each part of the pipe—stem, bowl, tobacco, breath, and smoke—is symbolic of the

fundamental relationships among plants, animals, humans, elements, and spiritual beings that keep the cosmos in motion. In pipe ceremonies, numerous pinches of tobacco signify prayers of blessing for each part of creation and the whole cosmic community. Thus the bowl of the pipe is filled symbolically with the whole sum of existence. As the tobacco is lit by the fire, inhaled and exhaled as smoke, these prayers of blessing become visible offerings. The pipe ceremony is so symbolically resonant for the Lakota that many Lakota people compare it to the Christian sacrament of Eucharist.

The pipe ceremony provides the Lakota with the spiritual grounding and power for the negotiation of Native identity in the modern world. Among the Lakota and the other Native peoples who smoke the sacred pipe, this ceremony plays a crucial role in the struggle to survive under duress. Pipe ceremonies often anchor other traditional Lakota ceremonies, but they are performed, too, in nursing homes, hospitals, prisons, universities, protest gatherings, and political meetings. Lakota people are conscious that with each pipe ceremony they pray not only for themselves and their well being, but for all human beings and the whole of creation.