

Sweat Lodge

Summary: Sweat lodge ceremonies are common to many Native American tribes. The ceremonies of the sweat lodge include rites of preparation, prayer, and purification. Sweat ceremonies involve heating stones until they are red hot, bringing them into the darkened chamber, and pouring water or aromatic herbal teas over them to punctuate the participants' rounds of fervent prayer.

The ceremonies of the sweat lodge include rites of preparation, prayer, and purification. Many Native Americans today claim the “sweat,” as they call it, as an important spiritual tradition, widely shared and resonant with intertribal Native identity. This is especially true for the many Native people who have been raised apart from their own specific tribal traditions. The sweat lodge today plays a very significant role in the lives of Indigenous communities in their efforts to bring about personal and social healing and commitment to collective values. It is said that those who undergo the sweat lodge ceremony together become relatives. Indeed, in the Sioux traditions, participants emerge from the sweat lodge proclaiming, “All my relations!”

The sweat lodge is a structure charged with sacred meaning and power. The domed lodge, about four or five feet high, consists of a lashed “tent” of bent willows, covered with blankets, hides, or tarps to hold in the heat. Because it is often said to represent the totality of the world, and is sometimes called the “navel of the universe,” the construction of a sweat lodge is no casual matter, but an elaborate process. Often built in response to a vision, sweat lodges are constructed with careful preparation, with prayer, and with attention to symbolic detail. The sweat ceremony itself admits of many variations and nuances of meaning, but in every case it involves heating stones until they are red hot, bringing them into the darkened chamber, and pouring water or aromatic herbal teas over them to punctuate the participants' rounds of fervent prayer.

Participants experience a purification of body, mind, spirit, and community as they feel the heat of the steam and as they offer their prayers and their songs. Because one enters the sweat lodge naked, or virtually naked, and undergoes this rite of cleansing and commitment, the sweat lodge rituals are said to be a kind of rebirth. When one emerges from the sweat lodge, it is common to plunge into a lake, a stream or a pond for a bath. Perhaps it is because this purification integrates physical, psychological, social, and spiritual

well-being that the sweat lodge has become so central in contemporary Native American rites and practices of healing.