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TITLE ROADS OF LIFE

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For most Native Americans, life unfolds in the midst of a landscape endowed with the symbolic significance that provides orientation and direction. The mountains, the cardinal directions, the celestial bodies, and many other natural features commonly reflect complex religious values. The cycle of human life, the journey from birth to death, is brought into line with cosmology by being depicted as a process of movement within the landscape. Life is a road one travels, and the proper course for that road is often replicated in many cultural objects.

The road of life is often described as an orientation. The Hopi, for example, consider the lifeway as oriented as from west to east. This is the direction in which the rain clouds, identified with kachinas and dead ancestors, move to bring the life-giving rain. This is the direction in which the Hopi ancestors traveled when they migrated to their present homelands from the place of their primordial emergence into this world. It is the direction one faces to greet the sun when it rises from its night home. The Hopi believe that an unwell person must reorient his or her mind to an easterly direction. The ill are accused of thinking in a westerly orientation.

The road of life is graphically depicted as a labyrinth by the Pima and Papago of the southern Arizona deserts. This symbolic design is often woven as a pattern in baskets. It consists of a circle, in the center of which a small circle represents the earth. Beginning in the center, four lines radiate in each direction in the pattern of a single path labyrinth. The directional lines are
associated with the four winds who are messengers of the culture hero and creator deity I'toi, represented in humanlike form at the entrance to the maze. The labyrinth depicting the road of life thus portrays the difficulties of life, its conflicts, and its confusions, but it goes beyond this. The symbol of the maze has long been associated with life and death, and the path under the direction of I'toi will find the goal in the center, despite the unavoidable complexities and sorrows in life.

Peyote religion, the Native American Church, has become a widespread religion among Native Americans. The rituals of Native American Church meetings depict the road of life according to the peyote way as a line drawn on a crescent-shaped altar. The middle of the altar is placed a large, perfect peyote cactus button which represents Chief Peyote, the principal spirit or deity engaged in the peyote religion.

For the Oglala Sioux, the road of life is distinguished not only by its directional orientation, which is from north to south but also by a red color designation. North is the direction associated with purity and south with the source of life. Thus, an orientation along this axis is the proper orientation for life. The red road is in opposition to the east-west orientation, which is described by the Sioux as the blue or black road. The follower of this path is thought to be distracted, ruled by his senses, and selfish.

The Delaware/Lenape depict the road of life in their Big House ceremonies and the Navajo depict it in their common symbolic pattern of the open circle.

Native Americans do not isolate a category of culture or human activity that they specifically call religion. Few words exist in Native American languages that translate closely to the word religion. Religion permeates all aspects and domains of Native American life and culture. Native Americans explicitly distinguish many ritual and ceremonial occasions. These often correspond with momentous passages in the cycle of life. Considered together, for any Native American culture, this sequence of rituals comprises an important segment of religion. These formal religious activities are often complex and serve a variety of functions. Through them, the individual gains knowledge of tradition, access to the privileges of performing certain vital roles in the culture, and access to the powers for the meaningful navigation of the road of life.

Focus on the religious life of the individual in Native American culture shows that life is lived as a journey along a road well charted and carefully directed by the religious tradition. Many elements in Native American religious traditions are engaged at each moment in the process of life from conception to death. This may be seen as a nurturing ambience as well as a narrow and precarious path. Further, while this ambience guides and directs the actions of each person, making his or her life meaningful from the smallest to the grandest terms, it also provides the person with access to processes of individuation, that is, to the way in which an individual is a creative, distinct human being situated within a community joined together by a common religious tradition.

Only a modest summary of any of these religious events is possible here, as the variety of data in North America is immense. Select examples may illustrate something of the many ways in which a religious tradition informs and activates the religious life of persons within the culture. These examples will be generally ordered to correspond with significant points or activities in the process of the life of an individual person. This approach should serve as an introduction to the various kinds of elements that may be present in any Native American religion, as well as a suggestion of how these elements function religiously and culturally.

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

Human Origins

In the creation era before human beings peopled the land of the Navajo, Changing Woman became the personification of the source and powers of life. The world was cleared of monsters through her benevolent and thoughtful acts and made ready for the origin of the Navajo people. When all was ready, Changing Woman took residence in a house especially prepared for her. This house is located in the ocean beyond the western edge of the land. Her house has four rooms, each of which corresponds to a domain and season of the world. The nature of Changing Woman, as her name suggests, to change from youth to adolescence to adulthood and then to old age in a never-ending cycle. As she changes through the four stages of life, she takes residence in the room of her house that corresponds to her respective life stage. In her home, Changing Woman lives in correspondence with the earthly life cycles of the people to whom she gave origin.

In the era when the world had been put in place, Changing Woman began to think about what should be done. So thought for a creation of human beings. She went to the first of the four rooms of her house and there rubbed off the outer layer of skin from her chest. She mixed this with pollen and formed it into a ball, which she placed in a basket on the side corresponding with the room she occupied. Then she proceeded through the other rooms, rubbing balls of skin from her back, her right arm, and her left arm. She then covered the basket and stepped across it four times, whereupon from the basket arose four men and four women, the progenitors of the first four Navajo clans. She dressed the men in fabrics and the women in jewels. Then, to distinguish them as human, she gave them speech and instructed them to tell stories to each other. She continued to instruct them in all the ways of human beings. She told them of the divinities, holy people, and how they might be contacted. She told them of the appropriate duties and activities for men and for women. She told them of the special concerns to which each of the clans should direct their attention. She instructed them about their houses, their fields, their animals, and their water. At dawn the next day, she sent them on their way to the land she had prepared for them.
For the Navajo, the road of human life is thus coincident with the way of the entire world.

Many Native American people articulate the model for human life in stories of creation. Human life often corresponds with the ways of the world. As already seen in many ways, Native American religious traditions inform human beings of the meaning of the world in terms of correspondences between the ordinary and the cosmic, between the material and the spiritual. The division of sexes, the organization of clans, the entire social structure, and the life process of individuals all correspond and interweave.

The origin of human beings is not always a part of the stories of the origin of the world. Where it is included, it tells much about the concept and way of life and the notions of destiny held by the people of that tradition. Many Native American hunting people, for example, trace the origin of human beings to animals or from the progeny of an animal-human marriage. More common among cultivating people are stories that do not recount the creation of human beings but rather are concerned with how they came to the present world, a journey, an emergence. For a people to have their way of life established by deities or creators in the primal era assures the meaningfulness of life and the promise for its fulfillment. Such an origin also establishes life as a religious activity, for life is in accordance with the creators and with the processes of the world.

Conception and Birth

The sexual act of procreation and the period of pregnancy are not usually celebrated by ceremonies of any extent. Yet, the prenatal period is often seen as a period of intense regulation of the activities of the mother, in particular, but sometimes also of the father and other relatives. Food, social relationships, work, even events that the mother and father witness are often considered to have an effect on the health and destiny of the new life. It is common for people who suffer illness or strife, even when well into adulthood, to attribute it to incidents that occurred while they were carried in their mother’s womb. In light of this attribution, it is notable that many Native American autobiographies begin with an account of the prenatal period and birth. In his autobiography *Sun Chief*, Don Talayesva, a Hopi, described the incident in which he was conceived as twins. Because the Hopi do not receive twin birth as a happy event, his pregnant mother underwent a rite in which the twins were joined together. In his words, they were “twisted into one.”

In some cultures ceremonies and prayers are given for the expectant mother as her time of delivery approaches to assure good health to her and her child.

Birth is an event carefully regulated by tradition, but rarely is it an event for ceremony. Public events are more likely to occur on the occasion when the infant and its mother are presented to the community and to the deities. A period of confinement is often required. Special prayers, such as the following one from Zuni, may be said to bless the newborn. On the eighth day of the infant’s life, its head is washed by its father’s female relatives and corn meal is placed in its hands. Then, at the moment of sunrise, it is taken out of doors and faced to the east. As the prayer is spoken by the paternal grandmother, corn meal is sprinkled toward the rising sun.

Now this is the day.
Our child,
Into the daylight
You will go out standing.
Preparing for your day,
We have passed our days.
When all your days were at an end,
When eight days were past,
Our sun father
Went in to sit down at his sacred place.
And our night fathers
Having come out standing to their sacred place,
Passing a blessed night
We came to day
Now this day
Our fathers,
Dawn priests,
Have come out standing to their sacred place.
Our sun father
Having come out standing to his sacred place,
Our child,
It is your day.
This day,
The flesh of the white corn,
Prayer meal,
To our sun father
This prayer meal we offer.
May your road be fulfilled
Reaching to the road of your sun father,
When your road is fulfilled
In your thoughts (may we live)
May we be the ones whom your thoughts will embrace,
For this, on this day
To our sun father.
We offer prayer meal.
To this end
May you help us all to finish our roads.

Other moments early in the life of an infant, such as the loss of the umbilical cord, the first laugh, and the occasion of naming are also commonly given special acknowledgment in North America in the form of ceremony and feast.
Naming

Native American views of names and the process of naming are illuminated by a phrase N. Scott Momaday attributed to his grandfather: “A man's life proceeds from his name, in the way that a river proceeds from its source.” With identity tied so closely to name, the selection and bestowing of names are often matters of ceremony and complex customs. Among many cultures, a child's name is chosen to identify him or her with an admired elder or ancestor, or may even serve to reincarnate an ancestor. The name is sometimes identified with the soul and hence with the very force of life. Names are also identified with stations of reality, as in the Kwakiutl culture previously described. The Eskimo reveal a similar view, identifying a name with the reality to which it is attached in a practice that accompanies the birth. As the mother is about to deliver, an elderly woman is called in to pronounce as many eligible names as she can recall. The child comes forth from its mother when it hears its name being called.

Many Native American cultures do not consider an unnamed child to be fully alive or to be fully human. If a child dies before it is named where this belief prevails, funeral rites may either be greatly abbreviated or not done at all. It is believed that the life force will soon reenter the mother's womb to be born again.

The life road is not simply a series of distinct steps, each leading to the next. The life road is rather a way. As one proceeds along the road, he or she accumulates the knowledge of, and thus gains identification with, this way of living. For example, the act of naming has major significance because it is much more than a once-used custom by which a person gains a label. In many Native American cultures, naming is a practice engaged at many points throughout life. One may receive names as awards for acquiring prestige. A name may be given a young man after returning from his first successful hunt or war party or after completing initiation into a particular society or order. The Choctaw referred to all boys, until they earned a name, by a name that would translate literally as “Choctaw without a name.”

Nicknames are often used to identify distinctive personal features or characteristics, but they may also be used to ridicule or criticize the actions of any person. Pronouns are commonly very complex in native languages. Their use may require that one precisely locate oneself, with respect to the person being addressed, with a pronoun in terms of age, status, kinship, gender, and situation. Some names are considered private because they are so closely identified with a person. Such private names would only be known by the closest relatives and acquaintances and used only in carefully regulated situations. Added to these are the English Christian names by which Native Americans are identified for official purposes by school and government officials. Even these names distinguish an aspect of the identity of Native American persons, an aspect often not of their choosing.

Practices associated with naming demonstrate the close association between the identity of a person and his or her names, and they also suggest the great complexity associated with personality and character. While names distinguish a person among a community, they also help shape and mold a person within the various communities and domains of culture in which this person must have a place, indeed, is known in terms of this place.

The formal practices that are engaged in starting the individual person on his or her road of life have a religious character. While these life-beginning occasions reflect beliefs about the nature of human existence and introduce the terms of one's destiny, they also create forms for the person, through which he or she may enter, not only into these beliefs, but also into the whole way of life with which they are identified. Naming is an important way of giving a person a meaningful destiny.4

RELIGIOUS AWARENESS THROUGH DISENCHANTMENT

As Hopi children attain the age of reason, around the ages of seven to ten, their first step into formal participation in the Hopi religious life is taken in their initiation into the kachina cult. Prior to their initiation, children are carefully protected from seeing kachina dancers without their masks in place, and from seeing any mask that is not being worn. Much effort is spent to create for the children a firm identity between the figures who appear as kachinas and the kachina spirits. From the children’s point of view, the identity is obvious, for they have no basis for distinguishing the costume and mask from the persons wearing them. The uninitiated child’s relationship with kachinas is close and extensive, and children frequently observe kachinas in their villages during more than six months of the year. They often receive gifts from these powerful and beautiful figures. They are told stories about them and they recognize them as perfect beings on whom depends the entire Hopi way of life. Some kachinas have a fearful appearance and threaten misbehaving children, frightening them into more acceptable and Hopi-like behavior. Children often imitate kachina dancing and emulate the high qualities identified with kachinas.

During the process of initiating the children into the kachina cult, the image that the children hold of the kachinas undergoes a severe transformation. The initiation rites occur during February in conjunction with the Powamu ceremony, which is the first major ceremonial in the kachina season. The children are taught many new things about their culture and especially about the origin and nature of kachina spirits. They undergo a ritual whipping, which serves as a reminder of the price they would pay if they revealed the secrets they have been told about the kachinas to the uninitiated. But the greatest effect of the initiation rites comes at the conclusion of Powamu during a dance in the kivas late at night. The newly initiated children are privileged to attend this dance for the first time. From within the kiva they hear the
Powamu kachinas approach and they see and hear the kachina father invite them into the kiva to dance. As the dancers descend the ladder into the kiva the newly initiated children observe that the kachinas are not what they had expected. In place of the beautiful kachina heads are human heads. Even worse, the children recognize the kachinas as their own male relatives. The immediate response of the children is often one of severe disenchantment, for the sudden recognition that the kachinas are masked impersonations threatens all that they have come to associate with the kachina figures. This leaves the Hopi children, at the threshold of a formal religious life, with serious doubts about the reality of the figures whom they had believed were essential to the Hopi way of life.

While it is clear that the Hopi consider this disenchantment to be a necessary stage in the religious development of the child, it is important not to assume that what the child learns is that kachinas are nothing more than impersonations. On the contrary, what is shown to the Hopi child through this disenchanting experience is that things are not simply what they appear to be. Reality includes much more than what one perceives with the eyes. It places the child in a position to learn what is perhaps the most important lesson in his or her entire religious life: that a spiritual reality is conjoined with and stands behind the physical reality. Certainly it is this realization that marks the beginning of religious awareness. For those who cannot comprehend this level of reality, the impersonation of kachinas could never be more than playing the experience of disenchantment strikes a deathblow to the naiveté that is characteristic of the uninitiated. The initiates can never return to that perspective again, for now they know what they could not even imagine before. This knowledge establishes an agenda of religious inquiry and a keen interest in pursuing it. The meaning of one’s life depends on it. The induction of children through the passage into religious awareness is found in a variety of forms throughout North America.5

INITIATION AT PUBERTY

As the sun begins to rise, a beautifully dressed young Apache girl walks to the dancing ground to take her place on a buckskin in front of a singer and line of drummers. They all face toward the rising sun. She carries a cane crooked at one end and decorated with brightly colored ribbons and feathers. Facing the rising sun, the girl dances to songs that tell the story of Changing Woman, who, by her womanly powers of creativity, gave origin to the world as the Apache know it. As the girl dances, she prays that she might be given the creative powers of Changing Woman, the powers to continue the creative process of the Apache tradition. By the time the set of songs has ended, she has received these powers and in this way is transformed from a girl into a woman. She has acquired the role, the status, and the power that accompany the beginning of her menstruation, which she has recently experienced. The transformation is completed and celebrated in a four-day ceremony that follows, perhaps the grandest of Western Apache ceremonials. In Apache language it is called na th es, which means “preparing her” or “getting her ready.” In English it is called the Sunrise Dance.5

Preparations for the ceremony begin long before it is to be performed. The family sponsoring the ceremony must select and prepare a dance ground with various dwellings and cooking enclosures. Huge amounts of food must be acquired to feed the hundreds of guests who will attend. A medicine man must be found to sing the ceremony. A group of elders must be convened to plan the ceremony and advise the family on the proper procedures. A woman who will serve as model, teacher, and sponsor of the pubescent girl must be appointed. The ritual paraphernalia and costume must be prepared.

The four days before the ceremony begins are filled with preparations at the ceremonial grounds. Family and friends gather for the intense effort required to make it ready. During the evenings of these days of preparation dances last until around midnight. These major social occasions are attended by many. They feature lady’s choice dancing, affording the girls a chance to make contact with eligible boys they admire.

On the day before the ceremony begins the ritual paraphernalia for the girl is prepared by her male relatives under the direction of the medicine man. All must purify themselves in a sweat lodge before they may engage in this important activity. The social dancing on the last evening before the ceremonial begins is the occasion for the first public appearance of the initiate. She appears in a buckskin dress of Plains style with her ceremonial paraphernalia. The medicine man sings songs during this dance. The girl dances in a demure manner, in notable contrast to the gaiety of the other dancers.

Central to the ceremonial paraphernalia is the cane. It is a crooked staff made of hard wood so that it will not bend or break. It will serve this woman as an aid in walking when she reaches old age. It is decorated in a complex fashion, recalling cosmic orientations as well as factors related to the privileges and responsibilities of Apache womanhood. It is considered an agent of prayer and an instrument of spiritual mediation. The girl is also given a scratching stick because she must not touch her skin with her hands. Avoiding marring the skin emphasizes the importance of physical beauty. She is given a tube through which to drink. It is believed that if she touches water directly it would rain during her ceremonial.

To identify her with Changing Woman, a small pendant of abalone shell is tied to her hair so that it will hang on her forehead. One of the identities of Changing Woman is White Shell Woman. A pure white eagle feather is tied to her hair which, the Apache say, will cause her to live until her hair matches its color. Downy feathers are attached to her costume so that she may dance lightly.

On the morning of the first day of the ceremony, the pubescent girl becomes an Apache woman by means of her identification, described in a set of songs, with Changing Woman and the receipt of her powers. A second set is sung that recalls the event when Changing Woman was impregnated by the
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The sun, a union whose offspring was a major culture hero of the Apache. The initiate physically identifies herself with Changing Woman during these songs by kneeling and facing the sun with her knees widespread in a symbolic posture of receiving the fertilizing rays of the sun. She sways from side to side with arms outstretched.

The next phase of the ceremony is the molding of the girl done by her model or sponsor. This woman, selected for her stature as an Apache woman, massages the girl as she lies on her backs. This act is done to give the girl the form of a woman. Once the massage is complete, the girl runs to the east, encircling her cane that has been erected at a distance. She runs to the east four times. Each time her cane is moved farther and farther away. The four runs are said to correspond with the four stages of life.

The girl runs to encircle her cane in each of the other cardinal directions, evoking the shape of the Apache world that appears throughout the ceremonial in many forms of number, color, and directional symbols. The girl's running assures her of a long and healthy life.

The four-day ceremony continues in a complex sequence of rituals. It is clear that in these rituals, as she becomes a woman, the Apache girl takes on a power as old as the Apache world itself. It is the power at the source of all creation. In her pubescence, she has become a creator, and through this ceremony she is made a bearer of the Apache tradition of creativity. The stages and ways of womanhood and life are revealed to her and she wins the promise for a long and fruitful life. By virtue of her identification with Changing Woman during the four days of the ceremony she acquires extraordinary creative power. She can cure the ill. She can bring rain. Many of the ritual acts during the ceremony use this power of Changing Woman for the benefit of the entire community. It is disseminated throughout the community by such acts as pouring many basketsful of candy and treats over the girl's head. Contact with her makes the candy a vehicle for the transfer of power from the girl. The candy is highly sought after. Possessing it will assure plenty of food, a good crop of corn, or it may grant a wish.

Much more occurs in the Apache girls' puberty rite than a simple change in the social position and responsibility of a single female. It is far more than a declaration of her availability for marriage. While it is certainly both of these, it is also a renewal of the Apache community. The Apache worldview and way of life, as sanctioned in the stories of divine creation, are reaffirmed. Changing Woman is made present among the people once again and through the presence of her power the world is made anew.

Girls' puberty rites are common and widespread in North America west of the Rocky Mountains. Almost without exception, the rites correspond with the onset of menstruation and they are usually performed for girls on an individual basis. The great differences in attitude about menstruation are clearly reflected in the way these rites are performed. Where menstruation is a condition of potential pollution to men, especially hunters or food producers, the initiate enters a period of isolation at the onset of menstruation. Isolation may last only for the duration of menstruation but it is often extended for a period of time, even up to a year. This period is a time for instruction, for self-reflection, and for preparation to be a woman. The seclusion is commonly ended with a feast or ceremony announcing the accession of the girl to womanhood.

While far fewer in number, some people, such as the Apache, associate the beginning of menstruation with the powers of creation. In this case, her presence brings health, beauty, newness, and a power to cure. Contact with her is sought, yet her potency may inspire a certain fear of her as well.

Among the most universal aspects of girls' puberty rites are taboos, restrictions, and special observations. These include a wide range of things such as hair styles, dress, posture, demeanor, work, rest, food, and bathing. Notably each of these is accompanied by a statement of what is thereby gained, avoided, or both. These ritual practices may be appreciated as an important way a culture articulates values, particularly those related to women. These ritual concerns show qualities and attributes both to be sought and avoided. The initiate bodily experiences these values.

Rites of initiating boys into manhood are not so precisely correlated with physiological maturity, perhaps because for males there is nothing so distinct as menstruation to indicate maturity. For males, initiation is often linked with accomplishments of food productivity, with the acquisition of a vision, or with the performance of some extraordinary physical feat. In many parts of North America, these markers pertain to females as well.

THE VISION QUEST

The crushing experience of disenchantment may seem like harsh treatment for young people. But disenchantment may appear mild when we consider the widespread practice requiring children to enter periods of isolation during which they fast in pursuit of a vision experience. In some cultures this practice plays a central role in rites of initiation at puberty. For many cultures, the vision quest stands at the core of their religious traditions.

In the Great Lakes area Ojibwa culture, it was the practice to begin early in a child's life to prepare him or her for a vision fast. The parents implored their children to engage in short fasts to prepare them for receiving the power of a manido, or spiritual being. By age eight, a child might fast two meals every other day. Parents might awaken the child each morning by presenting the choice of eating bread or charcoal, and punishments for the child who chose bread encouraged the child to elect voluntary fasting. While religious awareness through the visionary experience was certainly momentous, it was not attained without much training and preparation. During the years of scheduled fasting, the child was made to think constantly about the power and guidance that he or she would receive in a vision.

The ceremonial fast occurred at puberty. While more attention was given to boys, Ojibwa girls were also expected to do a ceremonial fast at the time of
first menstruation. Children were prepared for the ceremonial fast by being instructed on the importance of the event. They were told how to produce a vision and how to recognize and reject an evil vision. Knowledge of the way in which a vision informs one's life was considered essential for experiencing it properly, for the vision would not speak its wisdom wholly at the time it occurred. One had to live one's life according to the vision. In the process of living, the vision would reveal its powers through the good fortune, guidance, and protection it would direct toward the visionary.

At the proper time, as judged by an elder, the Ojibwa boy was led deep into the forest, where a lofty red pine tree was selected. On a high branch in this tree, was built a platform of woven sticks covered with moss as a bed on which the youth was to conduct the fast. Perhaps a canopy of branches would be prepared to shelter him from the wind and rain. Left alone in this place, the youth was strictly warned not to take any kind of nourishment or drink. He was to lie quietly day and night on this platform in a patient vigil for his vision. Elders might secretly check on the youth occasionally to give him aid if necessary. If the youth found that he could not endure the fast, he might return home, but he would then have to try again the following year. Further, if a boy had a bad dream or vision, he was instructed to give up his quest and return home to await another year. When visions rewarded the fast, they commonly took the form of a journey into the world of the spirits. During this journey the visionary was shown the path on which his life should proceed. He was associated with one or more spirit beings who would serve as his guardians and protectors throughout life. This association was given physical evidence in the revelation of certain objects that the visionary could procure as symbols of his spirit guardians.

For the Ojibwa, religious awareness and the acquisition of spiritual powers come as products of a long, difficult period of preparation. Its significance is great. The process is one of educating children in the ways of their culture. They learn the roles, duties, and privileges of the adults they must soon become. They are shown how essential it is to live under the direction and protection of the manido or spirits. The vision quest prepares one physically and mentally to survive a life that may often be difficult. Receipt of a vision serves to establish one as an adult. It is a passageway that must be successfully navigated in order to enter adulthood with prestige and status.

Among many cultures in North America, religious awareness begins in the cultural process that culminates in a vision gained through an isolated fast. But the vision quest is not limited to the birth of religious awareness or to initiation at puberty, for it underlies a religious understanding of reality that is widespread in North America. It is an act performed in a wide variety of patterns. In a review of Plains tribes, Ruth Benedict found that the vision quest might be engaged on occasions of mourning, as an instrument of revenge on one's enemies, on account of a vow made in sickness or danger for oneself or one's relatives, on initiation into certain societies, and as a preparation for war. The vision quest must not be considered as associated only with the acquisition of what has commonly been termed a guardian spirit. The whole notion of the guardian spirit is itself diverse and is usually taken too simplistically. Guardian spirit is among a number of problematic theological categories that have been used to interpret Native American religious practices. Aside from such concerns, the vision quest often does not result in the acquisition of a guardian spirit or a spirit of any kind, but rather in the direct acquisition of power. Finally, the vision quest is not uniform in its procedures throughout North America and is not practiced at all among many cultures. Further, the use and significance to which the vision is put varies widely.

Even with this great variety, common to the vision quest is a perception of reality in which the world of spiritual powers is essential to the successful fulfillment of human life. As the culture is given shape and meaning in terms of this fundamental understanding of reality, so too the individual person finds his or her identity, direction, guidance, protection, and destiny in terms of the awareness of this understanding of reality and engagement in it. It is at the core of personhood, joining the individual with a tradition and way of life, often integrating in the process the many domains of human experience and activity, from the banal and physical to the ethereal and mental. Because the vision quest is an individual event within the context of cultural expectations, the distinction and creativity of the individual within society is not sacrificed. Each person's identity and creativity is not only expressed but obtained through the vision experience and the powers to which it gives access. In some cultures like the Blackfeet, visions may be purchased, an act that gives the owner use of the ritual objects and words, which give access to certain spiritual powers. In this case, the possession of visions is, among other things, a display of wealth.

There are also other matters related to the vision quest: the distinction between visions and ordinary dreams, and the consistency of the symbolism found in the accounts by which Native Americans describe their vision experiences. There is general agreement that a true vision is distinguished by Native Americans from ordinary nighttime dreams or daydreams. Even the Yuman and Mohave people of Southern California and Arizona, whose nighttime dreams are central to their religious power and direction, distinguish between dreams of religious importance and ordinary dreams. Religious dreams seem to be of an entirely different character, and some individuals note that their dreams began even before they were born.

Still, while the vision or dream of extraordinary character has widespread importance in native North America, not every Native American is extraordinarily mystical and spiritual. As interesting as is the process of seeking a vision is the process that follows the vision experience. It is a process by which the abstract symbolic experience is examined, restructured, and ultimately transformed into a repeatable account of the vision experience. Only in the form of the dream story can such experiences be self-consciously used and shared with other members of the culture. In many Native American cultures, there is clearly a belief that the vision experience cannot be immediately understood. In Siouian cultures, for example, the abstract images and whatever can be described of the content of a vision experience must be told to the elders,
who help the visionary understand the meaning of the experience. Here the vision experience is sought annually for four years and each vision is considered to complement and clarify the experiences previously received. The vision narrative may not be constructed to the point of being told for a long time. Black Elk, whose great vision is so well known through his telling of it to John G. Neihardt, did not tell his vision story to anyone for many years. Black Elk consulted the story as a guide to his life.  

This postvision process in no way reduces the importance of the momentous impact of the vision experience itself. Rather, it complements it by engaging contemplation and imagination in constructing a symbolic narrative out of the vision experience, fitting it into the meaningful context of one's life experiences and the tradition in which one lives.

The vision quest simultaneously serves the individual person and the cultural tradition in which he or she lives.

PIGLRIMAGE

When physical geography is invested with religious significance, as is so common among Native Americans, physical movement can easily take on major significance. Shrines and physical features are significant to native cultures throughout North America. They are significant as world centers, world perimeters, markers of cardinal directions, the residences of spirits and gods, the transformed bodies of primordial figures, and doorways to the spiritual world. Some places are destinations of periodic pilgrimages, which enact historical or primordial dramas and serve to maintain the order and significance of the world. Some pilgrimage destinations may lie no farther than a shrine at the edge of the village or field, while others may be many days' journey to the peak of a distant mountain, the shores of a lake, or a shrine in the desert. The Papago pilgrimage was short, although undertaken for many years, remains in the memories of many Papago people. The pilgrimage destination was the salt beds that form on the beaches in certain north shore areas of the Gulf of California. This destination is located almost directly west of the southern Arizona desert homes of the Papago people. Papago men took the pilgrimage in the summer on an annual basis. A youth might elect to attempt his first pilgrimage at the age of 16 or 17 after years of training for the arduous conditions he must endure. Once having decided to begin making pilgrimages, a man must participate for at least four successive years. Failure to do so might endanger his health. One is classified as a neophyte during the first four pilgrimages. Not until completing 10 or more pilgrimages is a man qualified to be a pilgrimage leader.

Before departing, pilgrims prepared their equipment, salt containers, canteens, food, and prayer sticks and corn meal for use as offerings. Many restrictions and procedures were carefully followed. More pertained to neophytes than to the seasoned pilgrims, called "ripe men." For example, a pilgrim must not step off the trail; he must not think of home or women; he must sleep with his head toward the ocean; he must not spill even a drop of water; he must speak slowly in a low voice or not at all. Neophytes must not walk but always run and they must eat only two meals a day.

The journey was taken over a seven-day period, carefully routed to lead the pilgrims past water sources and to certain locations for ritual observances. Each stop was the occasion for making offerings of prayer sticks and prayers. The evenings were spent with special ritual orations delivered by the leader to the pilgrims who sat in a circle. These orations recounted the significance of the journey and the goodness that would result from its proper completion. Prayers asked for strength to carry out the pilgrimage. The day before they reached the ocean, the pilgrims ran to the top of a mountain to gain their first sight of the ocean. Here they made offerings and ritually gestured to bring the power of the ocean toward them. Before they traveled on, they filled their canteens and drank their fill, for the next 24 hours had to be endured without water. Traveling during that night, the pilgrims had to camp close enough to the ocean so that on the following day they could reach the ocean and return to this camp, where they would retrieve their canteens.

The next morning they traveled on to the ocean. Finding the salt deposit about a half-mile from the shore, they ran four times around the one-quarter of a mile long salt bed before gathering the salt. Then they ran the half-mile to the ocean, wading into it with offerings of prayer sticks and corn meal, stirring up the first four waves. Having made these offerings, the pilgrims ran along the beach as far as they wanted to go. They did not look back until they were ready to turn around and run back. It was during this run that the pilgrims experienced personal visions. These visions, according to the stories told of them, were often associated with things the runner saw, such as birds, shells, and seaweed. Objects associated with the visions were considered to be invested with power and they were picked up by the runners. The visions commonly foretold events in the lives of the pilgrims.

After returning to the salt beds they gathered and loaded the salt, which had dried during the day, on horses to be carried back to their homes. On their return, they approached the village in the evening, but, as after a war party, they did not enter it. This permitted some of the villagers to come meet them. Young boys came toward them, whirling bull-roarers in imitation of the thunder associated with the rain the pilgrims were understood to be bringing from the ocean. Old women came to collect gifts of salt.

On their return, the pilgrims, especially the neophytes, were isolated for a period of time while the acquired effects of the power of the ocean gradually left them, making them safe to engage once again in normal social activities. The pilgrim was isolated during this period in a special enclosure. He was given new dishes from which to eat. Every four days, his dishes were "killed" by having holes knocked in their bottoms, and new ones were given to him.
During this period of isolation the fathers of eligible girls might approach the parents of the unmarried neophytes to offer their daughters in marriage.

The pilgrimage is a complicated ritual process. At one level, it serves as a rite of passage from youth to manhood. This passage is based on the performance of a feat requiring the strength of a man, the acquisition of supernatural power through contact with the ocean, and on the visions gained during the pilgrimage. It culminates a childhood of physical and spiritual preparation. It initiates manhood and family life.

Yet religious processes that focus on the individual person often also serve the life of the entire community. For the whole community the salt pilgrimage seeks life itself. For it is through the pilgrimage to the ocean and the collection of salt that the deity in control of rain is persuaded to release this life-giving substance. The pilgrims bring back not only salt but also rain. Symbolically, the pilgrimage draws a parallel between the interrelationship of corn and rain and the interrelationship of salt and the ocean. During the pilgrimage, salt is referred to as corn. This is part of the ritual language of pilgrims. By going to the ocean, one goes to the source of rain water. Indeed, the rain clouds in late summer come from the gulf to the Papago people, and these approaching clouds denote the coming of a new year. By bringing back the salt deposited by the ocean, a substance itself vital to life in the desert, the pilgrims bring refreshing vitalizing rain, that is, new life to the Papago world.

This level of significance in the pilgrimage is expressed beautifully in the many pilgrimage ritual orations.

The remains of a cigarette did I place upright. I put it to my lips, I smoked.

To the rain house standing in the west I came. All kinds of mist were bound up there, And I could not (unbind them). It was my cigarette smoke.

Circling around it, it entered and unbound them, I tried to see him, my guardian [lit., “made father”] But squarely turned away from me he sat. It was my cigarette smoke.

Circling around, it turned him toward me.

Thus I spoke, to him, my guardian. 

“What will happen?

Most wretched lies the earth which you have made. The trees which you have planted, leafless stand. The birds you threw into the air, They perch and do not sing. The springs of water are gone dry. The beasts which run upon the earth.

They make no sound.”

Thus I said.

“What will befall the earth which you have made?”

Then, thus spake he, my guardian.

“Is this so difficult? You need but gather and recite the ritual. Then, knowing all is well,

Go to your homes.”

Then back I turned.

Eastward, I saw; the land was sloping laid. Slowly along I went. I reached my former sleeping place and laid me down. Thus, four days did I travel toward the east. Then in the west a wind arose, Well knowing whither it should blow. Up rose a mist and towered toward the sky. And others stood with it, their tendrils touching. Then they moved.

Although the earth seemed very wide, Clear to the edge of it did they go. Although the north seemed very far, Clear to the edge of it did they go. Then to the east they went, and, looking back, They saw the earth lie beautifully moist and finished.

Then out flew Blue Jay shaman;

Soft feathers he pulled out and let them fall. The earth was blue (with flowers). Then out flew Yellow Finch shaman;

Soft feathers he pulled out and let them fall, Till earth was yellow (with flowers). Thus was it fair, our year.

Thus should you also think, All you my kinsmen.

(Underhill et al., Rainhouse and Ocean, pp. 66-67. Used by permission.)

Pilgrimage is a difficult and dangerous journey. The destination is not one frequented or ever seen by anyone other than pilgrims. It is beyond the space perceived by the ordinary person and therefore is a potenti or strong place. The extraordinary character of the pilgrimage is marked by such things as special rules and restrictions, ritual language, and ritual procedures. The climactic moment comes when the destination is gained. The substance of power and the resulting transformations are effected here. Although first an affair of individual persons, the pilgrimage process forms a camaraderie among the pilgrims, a unity and power that, upon their return, is ritually disseminated to the
entire community. The pilgrimage transforms the pilgrim from youth to adult and from religious naiveté to vision-directed maturity. It also transforms the community, even effecting a new year.

HEALTH AND HEALING

In the Pueblo village of Cochiti near the Rio Grande River in New Mexico, a person who is ill may ask to be treated by a medicine society. This is usually done when one fears that one’s illness is the result of witchcraft. The medicine society whose help is sought spends four days in its society house preparing for the arduous task that lies ahead. The medicine men go to the house of the sufferer and the ensuing ritual cure builds in a four-day crescendo of events. The sick person is the focus of this affair, during which much singing, praying, and smoking are directed toward his or her recovery. The medicine society must pit its ritual powers against the forces of witchcraft and the force of this battle and the fear related to the potential consequences build dramatically. A climax is reached on the fourth night when the threatening presence of witches is felt everywhere and it becomes clear that the strengths being mustered by the medicine society must be great enough to overcome the powers of the witches. On the fourth night, a painting in corn meal is made on the floor. Lines of meal are drawn to connect the picture with the doorway of the house. After dark, the medicine men of the society begin to sing as they enter, carrying objects associated with the sources of their healing powers, such as figures of deities and animals. Wearing only a breechcloth and with his face painted, each medicine man proceeds along one of the roads of meal and places his power object upon the meal painting. This meal painting represents the collective medicine powers whose forces are invoked in these ritual procedures.

Into a medicine bowl, water is poured from the six directions and each medicine man adds medicinal herbs to the water. Each medicine man then approaches the sick person, rubs his or her body with ashes, and performs a divining examination in the attempt to locate witch objects in the person’s body that have been “shot” there by a malevolent being, a witch. When these objects are “seen,” the medicine men ritually suck them from the body and spit them in a bowl for all to see as evidence of the cure.

The curing process also attracts witches who attempt to win over the sick person from the medicine society and bring harm to the medicine men. Though warriors armed with bows and arrows are stationed around the house, witches may still intrude. They make their terrifying presence known by knocking at the doors and windows and by making horrid calls in the darkness.

Witches may harm people by means other than “shooting” objects of witchery into them. They may steal a person’s heart, the center of vitality. When the medicine society determines that this is the case, the medicine men have no choice but to attempt a rescue of the heart. They must enter the witches’ domain, the darkness of night, and do battle with them in order to recover the stolen heart. Leaving the home of the sick person, the medicine men run into the surrounding darkness. Invested with medicine power, they may even fly. The noises of fierce battle are heard. Sometimes a medicine man returns battered and bloody from his combat. Medicine men overcome in these ritual battles may be found tied tightly with wire. But with great effort, the medicine men will overcome a witch and bring it squealing back to the fireside where, in the shadows, it is shot with arrows and killed. The witch is often a small figure in either human or animal form. The stolen heart, in the form of a kernel of corn, is recovered from a bundle of rags. It is given to the sick person to swallow, thus effecting the cure. After sharing food with everyone present, the society of medicine men gathers its paraphernalia and departs.13

Witchcraft is but one of the causes of illness recognized by the Cochiti who attribute other illnesses to natural causes. These are treated with herbal medicines and ordinary means of rendering aid, including treatment by Western medicine in a hospital. A third kind of illness is distinguished because of its tendency to persist. This type, not attributed to witchcraft, is treated by a process that effects initiation into a clan. In this way, a person may extend his or her social relationships, an act viewed as a way of procuring good health and guarding against bad health.

Simply from the way in which the Cochiti perceive the nature of health and the processes by which they approach healing and the maintenance of good health, the conditions of one’s health may speak of meanings that transcend a set of physiological, biological, and psychological factors. Health is not perceived as a condition confined to the individual. While in some cases sickness is simply a sign of one or more individual factors, it just as commonly reflects the conditions of a broader social and cultural environment and even the conditions of the spiritual world.

In the Cochiti view, the world exists in the precarious interplay between the forces of the shiivana and of witchcraft and malevolence. Shiivana are various deities and spirit beings who serve the world by establishing conditions of fertility, nurturnance, and good health. They do not dominate and control the world, thus the Cochiti people must call on them and engage them in life-giving relationships. Order is threatened by the forces of witchcraft aimed at bringing ill health, bad relations, infertile conditions, and disruptive social relationships. Witches are manifest in many forms such as humans, animals, birds, and even fireballs. In the Cochiti view, the world is a battleground on which these two forces struggle eternally. Neither can dominate more than temporarily. The oscillatory struggle between polar forces constitutes the vitalizing force of Cochiti life.

Witchcraft is a subject that runs throughout many Cochiti oral traditions testifying the extent to which it influences the entire Cochiti way of life. Clearly it is a constant factor in social relations, in one’s attitudes toward oneself and others, in an individual’s perception of his or her place in the family, society, and whole Cochiti world.

With only this scant description of the religious thought of the Cochiti as background, the curing rituals can be understood. The medicine society is
engaged in nothing short of enacting cosmic processes. It spends time preparing for and invoking the forces of the shisana through prayers, songs, offerings, the use of figurines, shamanic techniques of divination and witch-object extraction, ritual battles, and a host of symbolic patterns that choreograph and coordinate the many ritual acts into a unified, strongly significant event.

Matters of maintaining health are a major part of the religion of many Native American cultures. Yet, perhaps because at some levels they appear to conflict so sharply with the practice of Western scientific medicine, these aspects of Native American religions have been greatly misunderstood or considered to be primitive psychology or primitive pharmacopoeia. This failure to understand becomes especially damning in any attempt to understand a Native American religion such as the Navajo, whose whole world centers on religious views of health. To a remarkable degree the Cochiti and Navajo focus on health as the core of their highly complex religious traditions. While health may be concerned with the individual sufferer, being motivated by and directly serving the felt needs of the individual, matters of health and healing are also how Native Americans create and effect worldview and social relationships. Health and healing are means by which Native Americans create and align themselves with the order and meaningfulness of their world. In Native American cultures, the condition of one’s health is the simultaneous barometer of the status or condition of the place on which one stands and the symbolic language used to gauge and express that status or condition. It also serves to reorient the individual and the whole social complex to affect these conditions.

THE JOURNEY’S END

In her beautifully poignant short story “The Man to Send Rain Clouds,” the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Silko describes the events at the end of the old man Teofilo’s life. When his children find him dead at a sheep camp, they paint his face and tie a small feather in his hair. There was a smile on his son’s face as he strewed corn meal and pollen in the wind and bade his father to send rain clouds. In even this minor aspect of the funeral rite of passage is revealed the Pueblo belief in the interdependence of the living and the dead. If one lives a proper life into old age, he will become a cloud or kachina spirit in death. These spiritual entities, then, are identified with the life-giving substance. For many cultures in North America, the journey along life’s road does not end in death but continues beyond this life and world. For the Pueblo and other people, the afterlife remains in intimate interrelationship with the world of the living. Hence, there is an affinity between the dead and the spiritual world. Many other cultures identify the dead with potentially malevolent ghosts and witches.

Common in North America are descriptions of human destiny, the goal of life, as living a life of good health leading to a death in old age. Death in old age is not the result of an imbalance in cosmic forces or the final failure of efforts to ward off ill health, but rather a passage that has been prepared for throughout the journey along life’s road. With death in advanced age as life’s goal, a premature death is often understood as a matter for serious concern. Consistent with Native American religious views of health, the occasion of death speaks not only of the plight and destiny of the deceased but of the status of the world in which the person has lived and died. Death before old age may be considered a time of grave danger, of high suspicion aimed even at members of the family and community, and of self-contemplation by the living about the conditions that led to this death.

Funeral rites are rites of passage, for they resolve the state of impropriety that arises at death: the presence of a dead person in the domain of the living. The rite resolves this condition by inducting the deceased into the domain of the dead. This is a particularly important religious occasion, for, whatever the status of the dead, a funeral rite of passage necessarily involves the contact of the two distinct spheres, the living and the dead. The occasion of death, therefore, affords a religious community the opportunity to address such things as eschatology, that is, final and ultimate things, and destiny. There is most certainly a religious aspect to all funeral and mortuary customs. Consequently it is possible to infer something of the religious beliefs of prehistoric people from burials.

Death is a major subject in Native American oral traditions. Stories that deal with various aspects of death include the origin of death, visits by mortals to the land of the dead, and the journey by a husband to the land of the dead in search of his dead wife. This latter story is of particular interest because of its widespread incidence in North America and its identification with the classical Greek story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

For life’s road to be meaningful, it must lead somewhere, it must have a destination. Death is either the event of life’s ultimate fulfillment or an occasion for religious concern and reorientation. Few moments in the life of the individual can rival the moment of death for bearing religious significance.

CONCLUSION

It has become clear that many aspects of the religions of Native American people are focused on the individuals. In Native American cultures the religious aspects of life’s road are central. The word individual is commonly used to indicate a person set against society. Individual freedom is usually thought of in terms of the degree to which one stands apart from society.

Yet, for many Native Americans this opposition of individual and society is not the case. While persons are subjects of numerous formal religious events throughout their lives, these religious events serve also to integrate them into society and the traditions that give it common identity and meaning. It is, perhaps, more fitting to refer to the Native American as person rather than
individual, in order to emphasize attributes of identity, character, value, and role rather than to designate a unit distinct from the collective. The Native American person is often given identity, nurturance, direction, and motivation in the process of becoming integrated with society. While freedom for Native American persons is definable only in societal terms, this freedom is nonetheless present.

Native American roads of life may be seen as a sequence of passages that conduct persons from stage to stage throughout life. They must also be seen as processes of the introduction and accumulation of knowledge, techniques, responsibilities, privileges, and relationships sanctioned by the religious character that sustains and gives life meaning.

NOTES

14. The English terms associated with witchcraft are often used by Native Americans and, thus, used here. Still it must be remembered that each Native American language has its own terms to refer to malevolence and malevolent beings. With the recent awareness of the positive intentions of such groups as wicas, for example, the term witch has become subject of renewed sensitivity, concerns not yet acknowledged in common use.