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Native American Religion - Beliefs and Religious Practises

Native American Religion:
Great Spirit

The [Great Spirit](#) is the supreme being and principal deity of Native American Indians.

Native American Religion:
Shamanism

[Shamanism](#) encompasses a range of beliefs and practices regarding communication with the spiritual world in which a religious leader, like a [Shaman](#), enters supernatural realms or dimensions to obtain solutions to problems including sickness

Native American Religion:
Animism

[Animism](#) is a religious belief that all natural objects within the universe, have souls or spirits. It is believed that spirits exist not only in humans but also in animals, plants, trees, mountains, rocks etc.

Native American Religion:
Fetishism

[Fetishism](#) is a subordinate branch of animism encompassing the doctrine of spirits embodied, attached or conveying influence through, certain animals or material objects

Native American Religion:
Medicine Man

The [Medicine Man](#) is a priestly healer and spiritual leader who enters supernatural realms particularly when the tribe is facing adversity

Native American Religion:
Herbalism and Spiritual Healing

[Herbalism](#) is a traditional medicinal practice based on the use of herbs, plants and plant extracts as the source of healing remedies. The use of herbs is combined with [Spiritual Healing](#) to treat the whole person - the mind, body and spirit.

Native American Religion:
Animal Spirit - Spirit Guide

An [Animal Spirit](#), or spirit guide, walks through life with a person, teaching and guiding them, and in some instances protecting them.

Native American Religion:
Sweat Lodge

The [Sweat Lodge](#) ceremony, or purification ritual, accompanies important events such as a rite of passage ceremony, marriage or healing

Native American Religion:
Medicine Bag

A [Medicine Bag](#) was a special, sacred container for various objects, or amulets, of supernatural power used by a Shaman, to carry 'medicine', or symbols, of animal spirits, good luck, protection and strength in battle.

Native American Religion:
Smudging Ritual

[Smudging](#) is a traditional Native American method of burning sacred herbs to produce a smoke cloud which is used in various

cleansing or prayer ceremonies and purification or healing rituals.

Native American Religion:
**Vision Quest - Spiritual Journey
Trance State**

A [Vision Quest](#) is an attempt to achieve a vision of a future guardian spirit through the process of fasting, isolation and meditation. A Vision Quest or [Spiritual Journey](#) was sometimes accompanied by the inducement of a [Trance State](#) for the purpose of attaining guidance or knowledge from supernatural forces or spirits.

Native American Religion

Native American Religion is a vast subject that covers the religious beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and practices of the indigenous people of North America. Native American religion is characterized by the religious belief that spirits are present in all things, both animate and inanimate. The Native American religion and religious beliefs are centered around the environment and the natural world of animals, birds, insects, plants, herbs and trees, natural phenomena such as rocks, mountains, rivers, lakes, and clouds and celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, planets and stars.

Native American Religion - The Shaman and Spirituality

In Native American religion lies the belief that the living are intimately connected with the souls, or spirits, of the dead. Spirituality features in Native American Religion in which beliefs or religious practices are based on communication with the spirit world through mediums known as a Shaman or Medicine Man, who also acted as healers. There are many stories, legends and myths about the Creator who is generally referred to as the Great Spirit. American Indian religion and beliefs were highly localized according to the traditions of different tribes so that it is not possible to fully define Native American Religion. It can only be explained by describing the beliefs, religious practices, ceremonies and rituals that featured prominently in their belief systems.

Native American Religion - Beliefs and Religious Practises

Native American religion uses help and guidance from the spirit world in order to treat the whole person - the mind, body and spirit. The following table describes many of the beliefs and religious practises that feature in American Indian religion.

Native American Culture - War Paint

Many of the pictures and images of Native Americans depict the Indians in full war paint. Many tribes of Native Americans painted their bodies and faces for rituals, dances and for battle. The designs painted were believed to hold magic powers for protection. Colors and

images were also used to make the warriors, chiefs and braves to look more ferocious. Their objectives were achieved! Native American Indians even painted their horses and ponies decorating them with war symbols or symbols of power, see [Horse War Paint](#).

The Warrior Culture - War Paint

Native American Indians had a highly complex warrior culture, especially those who lived on the Great Plains. Their religion was dominated by rituals and belief in a spiritual connection with nature. In their religion they blended rituals by promoting and preserving their hunting and the survival of it's people with showing respect to the spirit. Their beliefs were handed down from one generation to another. Experienced warriors were held in the highest esteem. The achievements of warriors were often reflected in the symbolic images of their war paint. The clothes, tepees and all of his belongings was decorated with the symbolism of his achievements and acts of heroism or his various spirit guides. Every mark on the face and body of an American Native Indian had meaning.

The Prayer Stick

Definition of Prayer Stick: What is Prayer Stick? A Prayer Stick is also known as a Spirit Stick or Medicine Stick is used to make offerings and petitions to the spirit world. A Prayer Stick is primarily used by a [Shaman](#) or [Medicine Man](#), but are also used and created by tribal members. A Prayer stick was buried in the ground which had a sacred meaning or significance and including springs, caves and near fields where corn is planted. Prayer Sticks are most often associated with rituals relating to religious ceremonies particularly of the Southwest Native American tribes of the Hopi, Pueblo and Zuni. Prayer sticks are called 'Pahos' by these tribes.

Description of the Prayer Stick

A prayer stick can vary in shape but usually long and narrow, brightly colored and decorated with feathers that are selected according to the nature of the petition, and the person praying. Prayer Sticks, Spirit Sticks or Medicine Sticks are most commonly made from cedar, willow and cottonwood and decorated with paint, carvings and occasionally wrapped in buckskin or other leather materials. The size of the sticks are generally taken from the measurement between the elbow to the tips of the fingers. The pictures on this page show Native Americans holding prayer sticks.

Native American Life - Peace Pipe

The life, history and lifestyle of Native American Indians is a varied and fascinating subject. The following fact sheet contains interesting facts and information on the Peace Pipe, also referred to as the Calumet. It was believed that tobacco was a gift from the Great Mystery, and that the exhaled tobacco smoke carried thoughts and prayers to heaven.

Peace Pipe Fact Sheet for kids

- Peace Pipe Fact 1: The name of the Otoe Native American Indian, in the above picture by George Catlin, is Wée-ke-rú-law, meaning "He Who Exchanges". He holds a pipe carved with an effigy
- Peace Pipe Fact 2: The French word 'calumet' means "pipe" is derived from the Latin word 'calamus' meaning "something made or shaped like a reed"
- Peace Pipe Fact 3: Fire symbolized the heart of the Native American people and its smoke, which could be created in pipes, carried prayers to the Great Spirit
- Peace Pipe Fact 4: Pipes are believed to have originated in the Southeast, and early tube pipes have been found in the ancient burial mounds
- Peace Pipe Fact 5: The use of sacred pipes in religious ceremonies and rituals spread across the length and breadth of the North American continent and became an important part of the culture of the Native Americans.
- Peace Pipe Fact 6: Sacred Pipes were considered as holy objects and treated with great veneration. They were the containers that held a burning offering and linked the user, via the stem and the smoke, to the unseen world and the Great Spirit.
- Peace Pipe Fact 7: The distinguishing characteristic of the sacred pipes is that the bowl is separable from the stem and the two parts are kept apart except during ritual use
- Peace Pipe Fact 8: The two parts equated to the pairing of female and male spiritual powers which, when combined, results in creation. The stem was symbolically male and the bowl was symbolically female
- Peace Pipe Fact 9: It was only when the stem was inserted in the bowl that the pipe became potent. The two parts were therefore kept apart and only joined at the beginning of the sacred ceremonies, and separated at the end of the ritual.
- Peace Pipe Fact 10: A common material used by many of the Plains Indians for making the calumet bowls was red Minnesota pipestone or catlinite. other redstones came Wisconsin, Ohio and Alabama. But many other different types and colors were also used. The Yuchi & Creek tribes used mostly argillite (black) and dolostones. The Cherokee often used a dark greenstone that which they often darkened with a walnut stain

Peace Pipe Fact Sheet for kids

- Peace Pipe Fact 11: The design and size of the Peace pipes varied according to the purpose and symbolism of its use. Some were constructed with a very long stem that enabled the, often hot, pipe to be offered with both hands.



- Peace Pipe Fact 12: It was traditional for the stem to be decorated with symbolic items befitting of the consecrated use of the pipe. The pipestem was often painted with symbolic designs, colors and symbols and bedecked with a beads and feathers. The end of the stem often served as a base for effigy ornamentation. The Pipe tomahawk, or 'smoak tomahawk' combined both the hatchet and the pipe in one single item - symbols of both war and peace
- Peace Pipe Fact 13: Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum/rusticum*) was a sacred and valuable commodity and was used as a type of incense, a sacred offering and during special rituals including those involving [Spiritual Healing](#), the [Sweat Lodge](#) rituals and the famous [Vision Quest](#).
- Peace Pipe Fact 14: Tobacco was often mixed with other plant products and herbs that were fragrant or sustained burning, confirming the incense nature of its use. Kinnikinnick, meaning 'mixture', was made from a mixture of various leaves or barks
- Peace Pipe Fact 15: Kinnikinnick included plants such as Sage, Sassafras bark, Dogwood bark, Coltsfoot, Bearberry, cedar chips and Sumac leaves, Lobelia leaves and Mullein leaves. Kinnikinnick was also placed in the fire for their aroma and smoke which lifted to the heavens taking with it the hopes and prayers and the people
- Peace Pipe Fact 16: The 'Peace Pipe' was a central feature of [Pow-Wows](#), which was the name given to important gatherings or meetings. The pipe ceremony consecrated peace alliances. A Native American would not break the words that were spoken in the presence of the sacred peacepipe. The smoke symbolized truth that went directly to Great Spirit, the [Great Mystery](#).
- Peace Pipe Fact 17: During ceremonies and rituals the peacepipe was nearly always passed by carefully cradling of the bowl in a clockwise direction which represented the travel of the sun. At the end of the ritual the peacepipe was dismantled to be stored separately and the ashes returned to the earth and blessed.
- Peace Pipe Fact 18: Peace Pipes were an important part of the symbolic regalia and sacred objects used by Medicine Men. Some Medicine Men used pipes with a series of holes, referred to as "cloudblowers", for sending symbolic puffs of smoke in different directions during their rituals
- Peace Pipe Fact 19: Flutes had special connections with the sacred pipes used by many of the tribes. The two objects complimented each other with breathe being inhaled through the pipes and exhaled when playing flutes
- Peace Pipe Fact 20: The open display of a 'Peace Pipe' was used as a passport of peace and acceptance when traveling in distant regions amongst unknown tribes.

Native American Culture - The Medicine Wheel

There are many variations and interpretations of the Medicine Wheel. This article provides facts and information about the different elements and their meanings based on the beliefs of various tribes of Native American Indians.

The Medicine Wheel - Four Stages of Man

The Circle of Life, is often depicted in the Medicine Wheel. The circle and the four equal parts and colors of the medicine wheel represent the lifespan, or four stages of man:

- Birth is represented by the color red
- Growth is represented by the color yellow
- Maturity is represented by the color black
- Death is represented by the color white

The Medicine Wheel - Balanced Life

The colors of the Medicine Wheel also represent the four qualities of a balanced life:

- The Spiritual life (the Soul) is represented by the color red
- The Emotional life (the Heart) is represented by the color yellow
- The Physical life (the Body) is represented by the color black
- The Intellect (the Mind) is represented by the color white

The Medicine Wheel - Cardinal Directions & the four peoples of the Earth

The cardinal directions are represented in the Medicine Wheel

- The South is represented by the color red and associated with 'red skinned peoples'
- The East is represented by the color yellow and associated with 'yellow skinned peoples'
- The West is represented by the color black and associated with 'black-skinned peoples'
- The North is represented by the color white and associated with 'white skinned peoples'