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The Spirit World & North American Indian Mortuary Practices

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From earliest times, North American Indians[1] have shared some significant commonalities. Salient among these is a deep spiritual connection to the natural world. There is among most Native American Indian tribes and nations a strong animistic tradition that embraces the existence of a spirit world and the interconnection between humans and this spirit world. Indeed, this can be found in most indigenous populations of the entire hemisphere. The belief in spirits is generally reflected in many aspects of Indian life including mortuary customs. It should be noted that the historical and political processes of acculturation and assimilation have had a tremendous impact on Native American Indians in the United States. Even though some elements of the past persist, mortuary practices have been altered considerably, and continue to change, as a result of these acculturative processes. This paper focuses on a few traditional mortuary practices that illustrate how Native American animistic beliefs affected such customs.

In the spirit world of most Native American Indians, humans possess one or more spirits or souls that upon death leave the body.[2] In the past, a common belief was that the soul of the deceased person traveled along the Milky Way to the afterworld. To help the soul on its journey it was common, therefore, to include burial goods with the body of the deceased. These goods were often possessions that the deceased might need in the afterworld. For instance, among the Lakota Indians of the Plains region hunting equipment would be buried with a man, and sewing implements with a woman. Some tribes, such as the Lakota and Blackfoot, would also sacrifice the deceased person's favorite horse.[3] Occasionally several or many horses would be killed if the deceased happened to be a person of high status and owned many horses. It is said that one Blackfoot chief owned over 4,000 horses and when he died a couple of hundred horses were sacrificed. However, if the deceased came from a poor family that could ill afford to sacrifice a horse, only the mane or tail would be buried with the dead as a substitute.

Among some tribal groups the person's soul would not be released to travel until after a communal feast was held. The "ten-day feast" of the Mohawks of the Northeast region was one such funerary rite. At this feast, speeches and condolences were made and then possessions of the dead were distributed among the guests. It was during this feast that the soul of the deceased would be released to begin its journey along the Milky Way to the afterworld. The Teton

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Lakotas had a similar custom but it was most pronounced when the deceased was a child. In this case, the child's soul was kept for a year in a special "spirit bundle" that held the child's lock of hair. During the year the family would make the preparations for the feast, accumulating large amounts of food, cloth, horses and other goods. At the end of this "spirit-keeping rite," the parents would host the feast giving away all the amassed goods. Indeed, everything including the family's tipi would be given away and all that was left was the opened spirit bundle releasing the child's soul. The community would then donate enough goods for the family of the deceased child to start life afresh.

The spirits of the dead were sometimes feared and precautions had to be taken when a person died. The manner of death was one factor that made some souls more dangerous than others. For instance, The Choctaw Indians of the Southeast believed that the soul of a person killed in war, by witchcraft or murdered would not begin its journey to the afterworld until his or her death had been avenged. They also believed that mentioning the name of the dead was potentially dangerous and hence rules would sometimes exist that prohibited the living from using the names of the dead for a given time. The Navajo[4] of the Southwest believed that the soul of someone killed by lightening was so dangerous that no funeral rite was performed. In such cases, the person and the hooghan[5] were simply burned down and abandoned. The Shoshone Indians also feared the spirits or ghosts of those who for whatever reason remained on earth. Dreaming of the dead was also considered a bad omen.

The intense fear of the dead is probably best illustrated with the funeral customs of the Navajo. The Navajo believed that the dead were potentially dangerous entities and hence took special care in their funeral rites. Traditionally, the burial of a loved one was a small private affair rather than a public ceremony. Only a few individuals took part in the preparation of the body and its burial. Few people would want to expose themselves to the dangers that the spirits of the dead posed. When a person died, the family of the deceased would hire four mourners to prepare the body for burial. These hired mourners would bathe the body and dress it in fine clothes but were careful to place the moccasins of the dead person on the wrong feet, thus the left moccasin was placed on the right foot and the right moccasin on the left foot. This was to ensure that the dead would have difficulty walking back to the village. Furthermore, the body was sometimes carried out through a special hole made in the hooghan so as not to contaminate the normal entrance used by the living. The mourners remained silent as they carried the body to its burial site, which could be an isolated spot or a rock niche that could be sealed shut. As in many other Native American Indian nations, the Navajo placed some burial good with the deceased and like the Lakota would sometimes kill the deceased's favorite horse. The actions taken after the body was interred also reflect the Navajo fear of the spirits of the dead. Once the body was interred, the burial tools were generally broken or somehow damaged. After the burial the mourners would return to the village by a different path and instead of walking would hop and skip to further ensure that the spirit of the dead would not follow. The mourners would than purify themselves in smoke and remain indoors for a four-day mourning period.[6]

Acculturation has clearly affected many of these mortuary practices even among Indians who have remained on reservations.[7] [Today it is not uncommon to see practices more akin to mainstream American funeral customs than to traditional ones. Yet, much of the spirituality and animism of the past remains and the interconnectedness between the spirit world and the world of the living is clearly reflected in some of these burial practices. Whether the spirits of the dead were feared or not, there is no question that Native Americans have retained their deep respect for their dead ancestors. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Indian struggle to reclaim the bones and other burial remains that had been found in numerous gravesites and which had been removed for scientific studies. It is in keeping with a long spiritual tradition that Native Americans should desire that their ancestors' remains be properly buried.[8]

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[1] In the United States, descendents of the indigenous populations are referred to as American Indians or Native Americans. I use both terms interchangeably in this paper but it should be noted that today the preferred term is Native American.

[2] The customs described in this paper can be found in Native Nations by Nancy Bonvillain (Prentice-Hall, 2001), which provides an anthropological history of native nations. This reference provides an overall cultural history Native Americans of North America. Another comprehensive account is Alice Kehoe's North American Indians, (Prentice-Hall, 1992). Both of these works cover the various nations by culture region in North America.

[3] The horse was introduced to North American Indians in the 1600's, and they quickly became expert horsemen, especially the Indians of the Plains region. The horse became a source of wealth and prestige among some groups.

[4] The proper name of the Navajo is Diné, but the term of Navajo is commonly used. Scholars have noted that the term Navajo originally came from the Spanish "Apaches de Nabaju", which in turn derived from what the Tewa Indians called the Diné.

[5] Diné term for a traditional Navajo home, generally constructed from earth and timbers.

[6] An account of mourning, burial customs, and other contemporary issues among Navajos can be found in M.T. Schwarz's Navajo Lifeways (University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

[7] Reservation Indians today tend to be more conservative and traditional than their urban counterparts. Among the several reservations in the United States, the reservation of the Navajo nation is the largest encompassing approximately 17 million acres.

[8] The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was enacted in 1990 giving Native Americans the right to reclaim such burial remains.