

The Persistence of Essential Values among North American Plains Indians

By:
Joseph Epes Brown

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INTRODUCTION

The focus for this examination of the complex question of the persistence of essential traditional values among American Indian groups will be upon the Indians of the great plains of North America. This selection in a sense is arbitrary, for similar studies could well be extended to almost any of the American Indian groups scattered in reserves throughout the United States, many of whom still retain, underneath the more evident surface changes and adaptations, a world view and life-ways still deeply rooted in ancient values. Since my closest personal contacts, however, have been the Plains tribes such as the Sioux, Cheyenne, Crow, Blackfoot, Arapaho, and Shoshone, I have chosen to look to these cultures for evidences of persistence in essential traditional values.

The use of the term "essential values" in the context of this paper refers to transcendent metaphysical principles which have been central to the spiritual ways of the Plains Indian, and which, it is insisted by this writer at least, constitute for these original Americans a valid dialect of what has been called the *Religio Perennis*. The uniqueness, or possibly strangeness, to us of the Indian's ritual forms or symbolical language should never blind us to this universal quality of the underlying values themselves. Due to this nature of the values we are here concerned with, there is not called in question the survival of the values themselves, for being ultimately timeless and eternal they can never in themselves be qualified by the vicissitudes of the socio-cultural environment. The question being accounted for, rather, is the degree to which forced changes issuing from an alien and generally profane culture will allow these values to continue to be operative within a changing cultural matrix and thus within the human substance of the individual himself.

This report will present first a description of selected core indigenous values of the Plains Indian as they are conveyed through their ritual supports, and thus as they contribute to methods of spiritual realization. This necessarily synthetic treatment should provide a reference base for the second part of the report which will deal with several dimensions in the dynamics of contact, as the indigenous culture confronts the pervasive and disruptive influences issuing from a materially dominant Anglo-American culture. The report will conclude with a brief statement concerning essential values which have remained viable to this day despite the often excessive breakdown of many traditional

life-ways. It will be noted, in fact, that certain rites and ceremonies among some groups have not only persisted, but are actually, through a number of complex factors, now undergoing a period of vigorous revival.

VALUES

Among the many sacred ceremonies of the Plains Indian I have selected three major rituals within each of which, and in their totality, there is provided all necessary dimensions of a true way of spiritual realization for the individual and for the social group as a whole. These rites are those of purification, the annual tribal Sun Dance, and the individual spiritual retreat.

The rites of purification, considered to be essential preparation for any important or sacred undertaking, are centered in a simple dome-shaped lodge made of intertwined willows and covered over tightly with bison robes. In the circular form of the lodge, and in the materials used in its construction, the Indian sees a symbolical representation of the world in its totality. Indeed, it has been expressed that the lodge is the very body of the Great Spirit. Inside this lodge of the world the participants submit themselves to intensely hot steam produced when water is sprinkled on rocks which had previously been heated in a special sacred fire always located to the east of the lodge. As the men pray and chant, the steam, actually conceived as the visible image of the Great Spirit, acts as in an alchemical work to dissolve both physical and psychic "coagulations" so that a spiritual transmutation may take place. The four elements, with the invisible spiritual Presence—or "fifth element"—contribute their respective powers to this purifying process so that man may become virtually who he is through first dissolving the illusory sense of separateness, then becoming reintegrated, or harmoniously unified, within the totality of the universe. In finally going forth from the dark lodge, leaving behind all physical impurities and spiritual errors, the men are reborn into the wisdom of the light of day. All the aspects of the world have been witnesses to this cycle of corruption, death, wholeness, and rebirth; indeed, the cosmic powers have all contributed to the process.

In the rites of the Sun Dance there is a shift in perspective and function. These dramatic and powerful rites, normally of four days duration, are generally performed only once annually, and should be participated in, directly or indirectly, by the entire tribal group. A major overt goal of this prayer dance is the regeneration or renewal not only of the individual directly participating in the rites, but also of the tribe and ultimately of the entire universe. The ritual dances take place within a large circular pole lodge, at the centre of which is a tall cottonwood tree representing the axis of the universe, the vertical link joining heaven and earth, and thus the path of contact with the solar power, the sun, symbol of the Supreme Principle or Great Spirit. Supported day and night by the powerful rhythm of a huge drum energetically beaten by many men, and by songs which are both heroic and nostalgic, the dancers hold eagle plumes and continually orient themselves either towards the sacred central tree, or towards one of the four directions of space. Blowing upon whistles made from the wing bone of the eagle, the men dance individually with simple and dignified steps towards the central tree from which they receive supernatural power, and then dance backwards to the periphery of the circle without shifting their gaze from the centre. The sacred forms and ritual actions are virile, dignified, and direct, and though the rites usually take place only once a year the power

of the sacred centre, now realized within themselves, remains with each individual and contributes to the unity of the people.

The third quality of spiritual way is the solitary retreat known as the "lamenting", or the vision quest. In this quest the individual, naked and alone, and in constant prayer, endures a total fast for a specified number of days at a lonely place, usually a mountain top. In utter humility of body and mind, often emphasized by the offering of pieces of his flesh, or the joint of a finger, the man stands before the forms and forces of nature seeking the blessing of sacred power which should come to him through a dream, or preferably a vision, of some aspect of nature, possibly an animal, who offers guidance for the future direction of the man's life. These natural forms or forces, conceived as messengers or Agents, constitute for the Indian a well understood "iconography" in which forms, with their accompanying powers, are ranked according to their ability to express most directly the ultimate Power, or essence, of the Great Spirit. Essential to this metaphysic of nature is the Indian's belief that in silence, found within the solitude of Nature, there is ultimately heard the very voice of the Great Spirit. This quest for supernatural power, coming symbolically from the "outside", but in reality being awakened from within, has always been essential to the spiritual life of Plains Indian men and women, and its influence upon the quality of their lives should never be underestimated.

Mention must be made, finally, of that important ritual implement, the sacred tobacco pipe which is central to all the rites which have here been described. In carrying this portable altar the Indian has at all times access to an effective synthetic support for spiritual realization. The rites of the pipe express sacrifice and purification, they affirm the integration of the individual within the macrocosm, and they lead finally to the realization of unity, prefigured by the totality of the grains of tobacco becoming one with the fire of the Great Spirit.

Pervading these spiritual ways of purification, of the Sun Dance, the retreat, and the use of the sacred pipe, there may be discerned a pattern for which parallels may be found in virtually all legitimate methods of realization within the world's great religions. This universal pattern affirms the sequence first of purification, followed by an expansive process in the realization of totality, or the state of human perfection, leading finally to the ultimate possibility of contact and identity with the one transcendent Supreme Principle.

CONTACT: DYNAMICS OF THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS

It is necessary now to pose the very difficult question which for decades has plagued those with a serious concern for the future of the American Indian: Is it possible today for small minority groups within the United States, or anywhere for that matter, to retain the integrity of cultural patterns and spiritual ways similar to those just described; ways which are rooted in traditions of primordial origin, and which had their essential supports in a world of nature still virgin and unscarred by the hand of any man?

All the forces of historical contact between the American Indian and the materially dominant White-American civilization seem to be totally against the possibility of any traditional continuity for the Indian. The power of alien forces and the inevitable

disruption of life-ways which have ensued must not be minimized. It should be recalled that the people's subsistence base, the bison, was brought to near extinction through commercial exploitation combined with an avowed policy of extermination by the United States Army. Freedom of movement was restricted through force to reservations often arbitrarily chosen. Governing techniques based on the accumulated wisdom of the elders were replaced by an imposed bureaucratic system which could never, even if it wished, understand the real problems of the people under its charge. In accord with White-American concept of ownership, the random distribution of parcels of land on the basis of individual family units shattered the cohesive unity of the Indian's own larger consanguinal groupings, and the prohibition of plural marriages disrupted the immediate family units. School systems were imposed which had as their avowed goals the suppression and eventual elimination of traditional values in order to hasten forcefully the process of total assimilation. This is a policy, with all too few exceptions, which is still basic to the reservation school system of today. Ill conceived government attempts at economic rehabilitation again and again ended in total failure largely due to the fact that agriculture, then identified by the whiteman with civilization, was a practice contradictory to all Indian values which held the earth as sacred and inviolate and not to be torn up with a plough. Among the most difficult trials, however, were the hostile attitudes towards the Indian's religious practices. Sacrificial elements of the Sun Dance were prohibited, as were the rites held for the departing souls of the dead, and it is well known how participation in the much misunderstood Ghost Dance ended with the infamous massacre of Wounded Knee.

What is seen in the assemblage of these series of traumatic shocks received by the Indian is obviously not just the inevitable result of straightforward military defeats, as devastating as these were, but rather we have the tragic drama of two cultures in conflict, each representing to the other diametrically opposed values on every possible level and in all domains. Such conflict between cultures was undoubtedly intensified by the fact that those segments of White-American society with which the Indian had the most contact were, with few exceptions, probably the least enlightened carriers of the more positive facets of "civilization". With the exception of some Christian missionaries of "good heart" the Indian found no segment of American society with which he could identify himself.

After more than a century of this quality of bitter confrontation with accompanying disruptions in the social, economic, political, and religious life, it is difficult to understand how the people have survived at all. Yet the Plains Indians, as well as other groups, have survived with such tenacity and even vitality that certain rites and ceremonies are today actually undergoing renewed affirmation. Much to the surprise of the social scientists, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs itself, the "vanishing American" has somehow not vanished at all. It had been incorrectly assumed, among other factors, that just as so many European immigrants had readily assimilated into the great American "melting pot", so too would the Indian. There was obviously the failure here to take into account the tremendous differences between the European and the American Indian. The result of this new awareness, on the part of the anthropologists at least, has led to a growing number of hypotheses to explain this phenomena of the tenacity of traditional values and cultures.

One such hypothesis has been the isolation of the reservations. This is undoubtedly a factor of importance, yet it must be recalled that with certain groups, the Mohawk for example who work in high steel in New York City, close and frequent contact has not resulted in total abandonment of ancient values. The sustaining power of culture-bearing indigenous languages has with validity been pointed to in the literature; certainly this is a factor which has been well understood by the reservation school systems which to this day often forbid children, under threat of punishment, to speak their own native language.

It has been suggested, with reason, that policies of forced or "directed" acculturation to which all Indian groups have been subjected, may lead to violent reactions which reject change and reaffirm traditionalism. A converse possibility which has been neglected by the specialists has been the role of the half informed, usually sentimental, "Indian lovers", the "do gooders", who would preserve certain of the "more noble" Indian values, albeit they should be incorporated with those "logical" modern innovations in such things as housing and hygiene. Paradoxically, such seemingly sympathetic approaches to Indian traditions may be far more corrosive to traditional values than the uncompromising ethnocentric attitudes of those agents of civilization who insist on total assimilation achieved through force if necessary.

Among the vast array of forces which may work for the persistence of traditional values is the often neglected psychological factor of the inherent stability of the basic personality structure which acts as a selective screen in processes of change. A dimension central to this complex question, but which is inaccessible to the quantitative experiential tools of either cultural anthropology or psychology, is the qualitative power of metaphysical, or cosmological, principles and the degree to which these become virtual or effective within the individual substance through participation in traditional rites and spiritual methods. Related to this entire question of the quality of personality is the fact that where Indians are still able to live within a world of as yet unspoiled Nature, potentially they have access to a vast array of transcendent values. It is essential to add, however, that for this potential source to become virtual for the Indian he must still possess, to a certain degree at least, the Indian's traditional metaphysic of nature. Where this metaphysic is still understood, and can be directly related to the supporting forms of the natural world, here the Indian has perhaps his strongest ally for the persistence of essential values; it is also in this metaphysic of nature that we find the Indian's most valuable message for the contemporary world.

A final factor relating to the persistence of values must be mentioned since it is crucial today to a multitude of problems deriving from attitudes in America towards minority groups of various ethnic backgrounds. White-American racial attitudes have historically so tended to devalue physical types of other cultural traditions that these peoples generally have been relegated to positions of inferior status in the larger society. With the possibility of social or cultural mobility thus being denied, many of these groups have tended to seek retention of cohesion and identity through reaffirmation of their own traditional values. The resulting low index of intermarriage between these minority groups and the dominant majority has in addition tended to slow acculturation. This is a situation, incidentally, which has not occurred in Mexico where positive valuation has been given to the Indian heritage. Among the ramifications of negative racist attitudes is the fact that many Indians who do attempt to assimilate into segments of White-American

culture tend to undergo a cycle of progressive disenchantment, a process often hastened by the slum conditions of cities, or by participation in foreign wars. When such persons then attempt to reintegrate back into their own traditional patterns they often serve as powerful agents for the preservation of traditional values.

This review of factors contributing to the holding power of indigenous values under conditions of extreme stress, is obviously very incomplete. Yet the sampling may be useful to an understanding of the final concern of this report which will be a brief assessment of the viability of rites and their values on the plains Indian reservations today.

CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENT

Reactions of the diverse plains Indian groups to several centuries of directed contact with White-Americans has resulted in such a broad spectrum of adjustments, conservative reactions, or total changes, that it is obviously impossible to make valid generalizations in terms of the contemporary persistence of values. Ranged on this spectrum of multiple possibilities are examples, across groups as well as within particular groups, of near total retention of traditional values at the one end of the scale to near total assimilation at the other end. The vast majority of groups or individuals, however, probably lie in the midrange and generally represent a more or less synthetic reassemblage of Indian and White-American values, always with the retention, however, of a remarkable degree of traditional Indianness.

If the range of possibilities on this spectrum are to be evaluated in terms of the major concern of this study, it should be pointed out that available data indicates that concordant with a high degree of traditional persistence there is generally a quality of culture that has cohesiveness, direction, and affords personal dignity. Assimilation, on the other hand, can be a double-edged term since it often represents acculturation into the lowest and least enlightened segments of White-American society, and this can be the first step leading to such extreme limits of cultural disintegration that we have the dangerous phenomena of a decultured people living precariously in a vacuum wherein they are unable to identify either with Indianness or with any of the White-American values.

In viewing the degrees of cultural wreckage strewn today across the prairies, a most impressive and hopeful phenomena is found in the fact that so many of the core indigenous values, with their supporting rites, are generally persisting among most plains groups. In spite of the virtual disappearance of a host of minor rites, still being practiced are the rites of purification, the Sun Dance, the spiritual retreat, and the rites of the sacred pipe. Sacred arrows, the original sacred pipe, and sacred bundles in general, are still being kept with reverence and respect, even though some of the spiritual meanings of these forms may have been lost. One of the most notable aspects of these examples of traditional tenacity is the fact that those who today affirm these forms and values are not necessarily just the "long hairs", the old men, but rather there is a growing interest and participation on the part of the younger generations.

An outstanding example of the contemporary process of reaffirmation is the increasing participation throughout the plains generally in the Sun Dance. Among the

complex factors contributing to this revitalization, which cannot be explained here in detail, is the example and stimulus afforded by a dynamic series of interpersonal and inter-cultural relationships between the Crow Indians of Montana and the Shoshone of Wyoming. The renewing interest among the younger generations may be partly explained by the fact that the youth have not been able to find channels in the whiteman's society for the expression of specific needs, personal qualities, or virtues, which had always been central, and which still are relevant, to the indigenous cultures. Public display of personal courage, sacrifice, and generosity, for example, are key Indian themes dramatically affirmed in the context of the Sun Dance.

Although the three or four day total fast required in the Sun Dance is still observed, the self-torture features have not been publically participated in since the government prohibitions of 1890. Such tortures, however, are still engaged in secretly by certain individuals. Also little known to outside groups is the fact that the spiritual retreat is frequently used today not only by the old, but also by younger men. It is evident, although it has not been specifically mentioned, that crucial to the spiritual ways which have been mentioned is the presence of the shaman or "medicine man". Judging partly from the present frequency and popularity of "yuwipi" rites, which allow for the ritual demonstration of shamanistic powers, it is evident that shamanism still plays a meaningful role among the people, and that it continues to have mechanisms for the transmission of power. The high personal quality and magnetisms of many of these men is a very strong contributing factor to the holding power of traditional values.

The true nature of a growing number of Pan-Indian movements, or what I call the "pow-wow syndrome", still remains questionable, for the stimulus behind many of these movements represents reactions to White-American attitudes towards ethnic minorities. In being rejected the Indian affirms his Indianness, yet in doing this he often seeks to identify with the whiteman's image of what an Indian is—or should be. The result is a complex of heterogeneous forms and practices which have popular appeal and commercial advantage, but which risk sacrificing true spiritual content. The phenomenal growth of the new Black Elk Sweat Lodge Organization, with membership cards and all, is undoubtedly a good example of this double-edged phenomena of Pan-Indianism.

In concluding, there are a few basic questions which must at least be referred to, for the issues are vital both to the continuing viability of essential values within Indian cultures, and also to the ultimate quality of the larger American culture itself:

Will educational policy, which for so long has been dictated to the Indian, honour and support indigenous values and life-ways so that the young may grow with a rightful pride in their own heritage? Or, must the schools continue in their efforts towards total assimilation, thus denying to the Indian his birthright, and robbing the larger American culture of the possibility of a spiritual enrichment which present crises indicate is so desperately needed?

May not Indian lands be allowed to remain inviolate, so that a unique religious heritage may continue to retain its supports in a world of sacred natural forms? Or, must policies for rapid termination of protective mechanisms continue so that remaining Indian-held lands will melt away under the pressures of often unscrupulous commercial interests?

But above all, and crucial to these and *many* other questions: Cannot it be affirmed that all peoples, regardless of skin colour, of ethnic background, or of religious affiliation, are rightful members of one family of man? Should not differences of appearance, of culture, or of religion, be affirmed as valid and even necessary expressions of a greater Reality, so that they may contribute to a richer world. Any alternative cannot but lead to drab mediocrity and ultimate chaos.

Whatever the outcome, we might well heed the words attributed to a great Indian after whom one of our cities was named, Seattle.

We are two distinct races with separate origins and separate destinies. To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. You wander far from the graves of your ancestors and seemingly without regret....

But why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, and regret is useless...

But when the last Red man shall have become a myth among the White man... when your children's children think themselves alone in the field... or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone... *your* lands will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White man will never be alone.

Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead—I say? There is no death. Only a change of worlds¹

¹ From: Frank Waters, "Two Views of Nature: White and Indian". *The South Dakota Review*, May 1964, pp. 28, 29.