

AN ANGLO'S PERCEPTION OF INDIAN BELIEF

by

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"Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye Lord: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged." Isaiah 51 vs 1.

Despite my close contact with Indians, I still found it necessary to consult with two Shamans and other knowledgeable Indians as to whether or not they believed that I knew enough to generalize about Indian Spirituality. After gaining the approval of Lacey Harris and Clifford Duncan, both Ute Spiritual Leaders, and some very religiously perceptive Indian friends, I will attempt to give you a little insight into what will perhaps add another dimension to your interpretations of rock art panels.

Although I know very little about rock art, I share the love of it that we all have. However, I'm extremely opinionated about the meaning of some rock art---believing that we miss the boat if we don't understand something about the spiritual implications related to many of the sites. In order to achieve this goal, we can learn much about the spirituality of some of the sites if we learn something about the beliefs of modern day Indians.

I repeat the word "Indians" as opposed to the words "Native Americans" as we all are Native Americans if we were born in this country. "Indian" is also the legal term used by Congress.

I became involved with Indians by pure accident. As President of my Archaeology chapter for the years of 1988-1989 I searched for a project that would bring our members closer together--or so I believed-- and it ended out with my restoring a Historical Indian gravesite on the foothills above Farmington, Utah. In searching for a Shaman to rededicate the site in October of 1989, I was rewarded by locating a Ute Spiritual Leader who agreed to do it for me.

The following is the opening of the book I am writing at the request of some Indian friends which might give you a little understanding of the sometimes subtle Indian beliefs:

"This is your destiny," said the imposing-looking Ute Shaman. "You have no choice in what you're doing. You're being led by spirits."

"B-b-but," I stuttered. "Th-that's not true. I wouldn't have been doing this alone, except that my two friends who were going to help

me left me to do it alone. Their excuses were really legitimate I suppose. George Tripp, who was the man who got the project for me, left for a Mormon mission in Mexico. Then, right on top of that, my other friend, LaMar Lindsay---he was the assistant State Archaeologist---well, he left for an assignment with the BLM."

Leaning forward, he almost whispered, impatiently, I thought. "That's what I'm telling you." A long pause. "Everything that happened was to cause you to be the one to do this. There's a purpose in this. There's a purpose in everything. There was a purpose for them to leave you. It is your destiny," emphasizing the "your." "You are a part of all of this and always have been a part of it," he stated with such self-assurance that it was difficult not to believe him.

In the course of preparing for the rededication, the Shaman, whose Indian name is Bear Boy, told me to purchase certain items for the ceremony, including a sacred pipe and a certain kind of tobacco. Upon delivering them to him, I found myself acting in a peculiar and almost eccentric manner. While professing extreme skepticism about things concerning the spirit and religion, I found myself wrapping all of the items in white tissue paper as if they were too sacred to handle. My hands and my mind seemed to be guided by an unknown force. In complete ignorance, I separated the bowl from the stem of the pipe and wrapped them individually instead of together. I later discovered that this was the only way to deliver the sacred pipe and that most pipe carriers kept their pipes separated.

Why had I behaved in this irrational manner? To any "white" person it would be evident that I was not endowed with any degree of mental clarity, but any Indian would take it for granted that I would do exactly as I did do. Therein lies a complete belief system that few of us non-Indians can begin to comprehend.

After I delivered these items, a lengthy ceremony was performed in his apartment, with me sitting on the floor as he had directed me. The ceremony consisted of many songs and prayers, some in English so that I could understand, and, intermittently, a repeated pipe ceremony. While this nearly two hour ceremony was going on, something very unfamiliar was happening to me. The reaction was not only mental, emotional and psychological, it was also extremely physical. At one point I was nauseous; at another point my head hurt. When it was over, I discovered I was floating on "cloud nine" and was experiencing a euphoria I had never experienced before and it lasted for nearly three months. Since then, I experience the same feeling when being blessed with an eagle feather fan.

That this was not all my imagination, a few days later, upon seeing scientifically-minded Kevin Jones, the Assistant State Archaeologist, I was greeted with, "Skip, what's happened to you?"

You look so different. You have an aura around you."

Being so confused and disturbed about what had happened to me, I consulted a friend who was a Mormon Bishop, Keith Sorensen, who, after questioning me a little, stated: "It's obvious to me that you have had some kind of a very special blessing."

I was so puzzled by what had happened to me that I called another friend, Paul Enciso, who is Apache-Pueblo Indian, and asked him what in the world was happening to me. Paul just laughed and told me that I had been given an extraordinary honor and that the ceremony had been given for me. He called it a sanctification ceremony to prepare me for the rededication of the grave. He further stated that he was not accustomed to prophesying, but that he was going to prophesy that this was only a beginning for me---that my future was helping in some way the Indian people--that he knew this for sure and that now Bear Boy also knew it.

Unbelievable! The prophesy proved to be true. In less than three months I found myself at the legislature directing the procedures for the passage of a bill that would not only fund the recovery of Shoshoni bones that were being vandalized when they were exposed by the receding Great Salt Lake, the shores of which were the original burial site, but also would fund a burial advisory committee which would determine policy for all future burial sites on State Lands.

This reverse archaeology project proved to be only the beginning for me, as one request after another was given to me to help with a variety of Indian matters and promotions. I learned very soon to do nothing that I was not asked to do to prevent me from getting the unfavorable appellation of "do-gooder white." I soon found myself immersed in Indian affairs and cultures.

Because of my constant association with so many different Indians from so many different tribes, I soon learned that Indian spirituality is an every day all day long way of living. There is a commonality of belief that exists among Indians, although, like most of us, their actions do not always correspond with their beliefs. Universally the first and the most important object in their lives is God. He may be given other names such as the Creator, Grandfather, Father Sky, Father Sun, or Great Mystery, but we are talking about the same individual or essence. From him comes all wisdom and everything on Mother Earth is believed to be created by him. Thus, everything--every rock, the fundament of creation, every blade of grass, every drop of water, every living thing called the four-legged, the two-legged, the winged, the finned, creepy crawler things, fire, stars, sun, moon, earth and sky---everything has a spirit because God was the Creator.

If you were to create anything such as a painting, a craft item such as an eagle feather fan or a dance bustle, beadwork--anything at all--that item will also have a spirit because it was created.

Hence, all rock art panels have a spirit whether or not the spirit is a good spirit or a bad spirit. If you see the panel with your heart instead of just your mind, you will indeed feel the power of the spirit that is there. Teresa Pijoan cautioned all of us that to understand rock art it must come from the heart, not just the head. Clifford Duncan said somewhat the same thing. In response to Nowell Morris's question to Clifford as to a translation of the prayers he said at the dedication of the Medicine Wheel on Tom Freestone's ranch, Clifford responded with the explanation that all of the spirits of the rocks were asleep and the prayers were to awaken them and have them dance with us.

Perhaps you have noticed that on a Navajo rug there will be a contrasting thread that runs to the edge of the rug. That serves two purposes. First, it is the spirit line or opening that permits the spirit to come and go from the rug. A similar thing can be found on jewelry--there will always be some kind of a mistake so that the spirits can come and go at will. A glass showcase filled with Kachina Dolls will always have an opening someplace for the movements of the spirits found there. Secondly, in addition to this, the mistakes also show the Creator that we are aware that we are less than perfect, and although we can create something, we cannot do it with the perfection that he could do.

The second major belief and concern of Indians would be themselves and family. Family comes before any of the traditional values that we espouse such as honesty and integrity. That is not to say that they don't cherish these values, but no matter what a family member might do, they will be upheld by other family members even at the expense of their personal belief systems. Most importantly is their concept of individual freedom, which concept we learned from the Indians and used as the basis of our Constitution. They believe bravery and pride in themselves is a useful goal because then they are free to do the right thing and not be forced. This loss of individual freedom was perhaps the most demoralizing thing that our ancestors did to the Indians when they were forced onto reservations.

The third belief concerns their fellow men. They strongly believe in the generosity of sharing; thus, the concept of private ownership of houses, food, cars, property (both real and personal) etc., is very much against their entire manner of living. The giveaway which is now so popular at PowWows, falls into this category of concern for one's fellow man. The potlatch among the Northwestern Indians is another variation of this same concern. Sometimes the generosity with gifts will extend to the donor's giving away even his clothes, his house and his car.

The giveaway by Urban Indians at PowWows is often to honor people whom they like or who deserve the honor and its accompanying gift, to such as the Head Lady and Head man dancers, the PowWow Spiritual Leader, the arena director and the announcer. The host drum is

always given a gift of money.

As an example of this concern, November 6 of 1992 was my giveaway. This was a customary memorial for my deceased husband who was honored with an honor dance which I danced accompanied on my left by the PowWow Spiritual Leader. Because my family did not realize what an honor was being given to my husband and to me as Anglos, they did not attend that November PowWow in support of me. I did not know until many weeks later that fifty to one hundred Indians joined in behind me to represent my absent family. It was an extraordinary experience especially from the standpoint of spirituality.

Out of respect for the Indian culture, I refrained from dancing for one year which is the custom with many tribes. There was a second honor dance given for me prior to my giveaway. The event was somewhat like a "coming out" party where my year of official mourning was over. The giveaway and honor dance represented my being returned to the "Circle" which is filled with symbolism such as being returned to the Circle of Life. As a reward for my observance of Indian custom, I was invited to join the Utah Inter-Tribal Veteran's Association and I've been a very active auxiliary member.

The fourth belief and concern of Indians and the one which we have all heard about, is our world--our Mother Earth. They revere our world and out of their understanding of what the earth needs, their goal is an adjustment to Nature, not the exploitation of all the earth's resources as we "whites" are prone to do. There are hundreds of examples of our unwillingness to accord the Indian any credibility in knowing how to "save" our earth. Most, if not all Indians, believe that the earth is literally our Mother. This is an extremely difficult idea for Anglos to comprehend, much less accept as a reality. Yet, if one really thinks about it, our survival is totally dependent upon what the earth provides for us. It is not completely illogical for us to accept this concept of the earth as our Mother.

Indians do not think in a linear manner as do "whites." Their thinking parallels the Circle of Life in that there is no beginning and no ending. Everything moves in a circle, or in today's jargon, "what goes around comes around." Thus time does not rule the Indian as it does other races. The joke about "Indian Time" is actually the reality of the uselessness of being "time conscious." The average Indian, when not too caught up in our hectic society, would eat only when hungry; sleep when tired; work only enough to sustain life; fish and hunt any old time; play whenever possible and enjoy life to the fullest at all times. His prayers are his barometer for the conscious contact with the Creator. Most Indians pray to begin the day, before meals and at the end of the day.

They all share the belief that all life is in a circle, and that

the four cardinal directions with their symbolic four holy colors are explanations as well as goals to achieve with the ultimate goal being to become centered within the Circle of Life. When this is accomplished, all of a person's life is in complete balance. The number four, and its multiples, is a sacred number and even during a PowWow contest dance some tribes confine the songs to four pushups, meaning that they will repeat the song four times.

Everything is symbolic in an Indian's life. "Symbols express and represent meaning. Meaning helps provide purpose and understanding in the lives of human beings. Indeed to live without symbols is to experience existence far short of its full meaning. Ways of expressing and representing meaning include the symbol systems of mathematics, spoken and written language and the arts." (quoted from "The Sacred Tree.")

"The medicine wheel is an ancient symbol used by almost all the Native people of North and South America. There are many different ways that this basic concept is expressed: the four grandfathers, the four winds, the four cardinal directions, and many other relationships that can be expressed in sets of four. Just like a mirror can be used to see things not normally visible (e.g. behind us or around a corner), the medicine wheel can be used to help us see or understand things we can't quite see or understand because they are ideas and not physical objects." (ibid)

Different tribes use different places on the wheel to represent their symbols, but basically the values will be the same. For example, the four holy colors are white, red, yellow and black. Different tribes might vary the location of these values, such as white being placed on the east or even the north. The cross that dissects the circle will always run north to south, and east to west, thereby delineating the four cardinal directions. It is at these points that the symbolic meanings come into play. Besides the values expressed in the above paragraph from the Sacred Tree, the colors represent the four races living on Mother Earth. They also represent fire, earth, air and water. They can represent birth, adolescence, maturity and old age. Then again, they represent aspects of ourselves such as the mental, the spiritual, the emotional and the physical. The symbolic meanings can be endless and each of us can add our own symbolic meanings to those that are usually found.

The most important aspect of the medicine wheel is that it is spiritual in nature and promotes good medicine, with the word "medicine" meaning "power"...the power of learning, the power of receiving help from the spirits of the cardinal directions, and, besides many other powers, the power to be centered in the Circle of Life, which is the ultimate goal while being on Mother Earth. Other factors such as the lines denoting the equinoxes and solstices, if present, are, while informative, incidental to the importance of the wheel, which is spiritual.

Many Indians believe that red is a universal color that represents everything in the world. Interestingly enough, red has symbolized the life force for over 50,000 years as evidenced by Neanderthal burials. Traveling the red road is tantamount to traveling the straight and narrow in the Christian world. Probably red was accepted this way because of its availability in iron oxide and red clay. When the Anglos first saw the Plains Indians who inhabited the area south of the Canadian border down to the Missouri River, they were startled to see them covered in red clay--hence, they labeled the Indian the Red Man. They were unaware that the red clay was used as a sun screen to prevent sunburn.

There are two ceremonies that are decidedly pan-Indian. They are the sweat lodge and the sacred pipe. The sweat lodge is not a hygienic exercise. The sweat lodge is the same as a church and is regarded as the most sacred place a person could be to sing and pray. The sacred pipe ceremony is meticulous in its meaning. When the stem, which represents the male aspect is joined to the bowl, representing the female aspect, the pipe becomes a living thing. The smoke carries the prayers to the Creator and the stem of the pipe is always presented to the Creator, with the bowl facing the person holding the pipe. The pipe has been used for thousands of years all over North America as evidenced by finds in archaeological explorations.

The Canadian and U.S. traditional Indians unanimously believe that we are all related. If you should even kill a fly, or cut a flower, you are killing your brother or sister. When an Indian kills an animal or harvests a vegetable for food, something is always returned to Mother Earth. Often this offering consists of tobacco or sage, but it must not be picked or cut on the spot. It usually is carried in a medicine bag. When cooking the meat or vegetables, such as in a stew, a bowl of the food is set aside for the spirit.

When leaving a sweat lodge, all participants utter the words, "all my relations." When praying, many Indians will pray for the two-legged, the four-legged, the winged, the finned and all my relations which includes not only all living things, but all inanimate things such as rocks, the sun and water as well.

One other pan-Indian symbol is the eagle. Because the eagle is believed to fly higher than any other bird, the eagle is a messenger both to and from God. It also carries prayers to the Creator as does the smoke from tobacco. Sweet grass and sage smudges are used by many, many tribes to purify both humans and animals in addition to inanimate things.

At this point, however, vast tribal differences occur in rituals, myths, ceremonies, dances, traditions, apparel and beliefs. Most Indians in the United States and Canada are Christian, but acceptance of the Christian faith does not obliterate any of their

tribal beliefs except in a very few instances. The Native American Church uses the Bible for its scripture, yet uses peyote for its most sacred ceremonies which are often healing ceremonies.

Practicing Indian Mormons, Catholics, Episcopalians, etc., still believe in and become a part of many tribal ceremonies. Blessings by Spiritual Leaders or Shamans will still be given with the use of an eagle feather fan or even just an eagle feather. Likewise, when I was given a blessing in August, 1993, inside the Shoshoni Sun Dance Arbor at Fort Hall, Idaho, not only was the eagle feather fan used by the Medicine Woman, but also an eagle bone whistle embellished with fluff eagle feathers was brushed over my head and body. Prior to the Sun Dance blessing, I was blessed with the smoke from burning sweet grass and an eagle feather fan.

Because their religious views are not as limited as most Christians, Indians have little difficulty in vacillating back and forth between a structured Christian ceremony on a Sunday morning, to a formal ritual such as a healing ceremony in the afternoon. This sort of global viewpoint also allows, at least urban Indians, to participate in ceremonies of tribes other than their own.

There is absolutely no similarity in ceremonies performed by the Plains Indians, the Northwest Indians, the Southwest Indians, the Eastern Indians, etc. For example, the Hopis have their Kachinas and their Snake Dancers who do ceremonial dances for six months out of each year. The Snake Dancers use live rattle snakes both in and out of the Kiva.

The Navajo's who live adjoining the Hopi reservation, use ceremonies such as the Blessing Way that last for nine days--some more, some less. At these ceremonies all the relatives for miles and miles away are invited, and must be fed for the duration of the ceremony, thus making the ceremony not only a lot of work for the family who invited the medicine man, but also very expensive. These ceremonies are most often in the nature of a healing.

Many of the Plains Indians have the Sun Dance which is a very sacred dance. This dance which lasts four days in most tribes is to benefit the tribe and is also a dance to ask for help for the healing of those who are ill. However, there are wide variations in this ceremony also. For example, the Lakotas, who still pierce their flesh allow women to dance in the Sun Dance, but not to pierce. The Shoshonis allow women on an equal basis to the men, while the Utes do not allow women to dance at all.

The variety of ceremonies is endless, but the ceremonies are all considered sacred regardless of the reason for the ceremony. Often these ceremonies are for a healing.

Lucid dreams are extremely important to nearly all Indians. The Indian understood the message of the dream centuries before Sigmund



Freud discovered the importance of dreams to a person's well-being. Vision quests are a similar, though much more rigorous, method of communicating with the spirits.

The conclusion I hope you will make from all of this is to be aware that all Indians believe that the rocks have a spirit and the glyph also has a spirit. These could very well be conflicting spirits or they could be living in harmony. Pictures on the rocks may also be a learning tool as Clifford Duncan explains how modern-day Utes use some of the glyphs to teach their children. Often, they can be the result of a dream or a vision, as well as telling the history of an event. Feathers on the head could denote a warrior as readily as a Shaman. The rocks can be a witness to an Indian's reality as stated in the Christian's Holy Book, the Bible.

And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God. Joshua 24, vs 27.