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NATIVE SPIRITUALITY GUIDE

The purpose of this guide is to help police officers gain an understanding of sacred ceremonies practised and sacred items carried by many Native people across Canada.

Please note: The ceremonial items presented in this guide were originally offered by an Elder for use in an educational environment. The RCMP is sensitive to the fact that many Elders do not consent to the technical reproduction of spiritual elements in this fashion. The RCMP sincerely appreciates the assistance of the carrier of this bundle in making this project possible.

It should be noted that the various spiritual beliefs and sacred items and ceremonies portrayed in this guide may vary according to different tribal groups across Canada. The reader is advised to use the local community as a reference base as local Elders will be able to clarify their traditional ceremonial practises as well as the significance of individual sacred objects.

The RCMP wishes to acknowledge the co-operation of Corrections Canada and Manitoba Native Elders Art Shofley, Angus Merrick, Charlie Nelson and Velma Orvis for contributing material for this guide.

The Circle of Life

"You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days, when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living centre of the hoop and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The East gave peace and light, the South gave warmth, The West gave rain and the North, with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion. Everything the Power of the World does, is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard the earth is round like a ball and so are the stars. The Wind, in its greatest power whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were. The life of man is

a circle from childhood to childhood and so it is in everything where power moves. Our Teepees were round like the nests of birds and these were always set in a circle, the nation 's hoop, a nest of many nests where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children. "

(Black Elk Speaks, pp. 198-200) Spiritual Advisor to the Oglala Sioux in 1930.

Traditions

Native cultures in their traditional nature are authentic and dynamic, fostering distinctive and sophisticated development. A sense of identity, pride and self-esteem are rooted in established spiritual principles.

Native spiritual life is founded on a belief in the fundamental inter-connectedness of all natural things, all forms of life with primary importance being attached to Mother Earth.

The Medicine Wheel

The symbol of the circle holds a place of special importance in Native beliefs. For the North American Indian, whose culture is traditional rather than literate, the significance of the circle has always been expressed in ritual practise and in art. The lives of men and women, as individual expressions of the Power of the World move in and are nourished by an uninterrupted circular/spiral motion. This circle is often referred to as the Medicine Wheel. Human beings live, breathe and move, giving additional impetus to the circular movement, provided they live harmoniously, according to the circle's vibratory movement. Every seeker has a chance to eventually discover a harmonious way of living with their environment according to these precepts.



The Four Powers

Each of the four directions represents a particular way of perceiving things, but none is considered superior or more significant than the other. The emphasis is always placed on the need to seek and explore each of the four great ways in order to gain a thorough understanding of one's own nature in relation to the surrounding world.

The four cardinal points of the circle transcend the mere compass directions. The directions themselves embody four powerful natural forces representing seasonal influences associated with various other powerful attributes.

North represents Wisdom. Its colour is white, its power animal is the buffalo and its gift is strength and endurance. From the South comes the gift of warmth and growth after winter is over, a place of innocence and trust. Its colour is green (or sometimes red), its power animal, the mouse. To the West is the place of introspection, of looking within one's spirit. Its colour is black, its gift rain and its power animal the bear. The East is marked by the sign of the Eagle. Its colour is gold for the sun's illumination, the new dawning sky and enlightenment. Its gift is peace and light.

Understanding the meaning of the Medicine Wheel depends on the concept that a person's life consists of "conquering the four hills: Infancy, Youth, Maturity and Old Age. The four stages are celebrated in ritual as the four prime moments in life corresponding to the four directions.

The first hill is the South (innocence and trust) where the infant's reception into life occurs. The second hill, that of introspection, in the West, becomes the youth's solitary vigil and quest for vision. This first quest seeks the revelation of the Great Spirit's manifestation and continuing presence.

This is the time when a power animal attribute enters a Native individual's soul becoming a part of his or her name. (Sitting Bull, Black Elk, Crazy Horse and so on). It marks the beginning of the dweller within, the dreaming soul that contacts the higher spiritual planes bringing back visions that serve as fundamental guide posts in life. The hill of maturity lies to the North and represents the successful realization of ability and ambition. It is the place of recognition in which the pursuit of wisdom underlies and nourishes all action. Sympathy with life itself grows in this quarter.

The final hill is that of old age situated in the East. It represents a quiet, reflective and meditative segment where the old ones now can pass on their knowledge to youth as they have mastered the meaning of joy and sorrow and the many other trials and tribulations encountered over the course of their existence.

Ceremonies

Ceremonies are the primary vehicles of religious expression. A ceremonial leader or Elder assures authenticity and integrity of religious observances. Nothing is written down, as the very writing would negate the significance of the ceremony. Teachings are therefore passed on from Elder to Elder in a strictly oral tradition.

Elders

Elders may be either men or women. Their most distinguishing characteristic is wisdom which relates directly to experience and age. There are exceptions. Elders need not be "old". Sometimes the spirit of the Great Creator chooses to imbue a young native. Elders' spiritual gifts differ. Some may interpret dreams. Others may be skilful in herbal remedies or be healers during a sweat lodge ceremony, and so on.

Prayers

Natives communicate with the Great Creator and spirit helpers through prayers offered at individual or group ceremonies.

Pipes

Pipes are used during both private and group ceremonies, the prayer itself being wafted through the smoke of the burning plant material. Pipes are of no set length. Some stems may or may not be decorated with beads or leather. Others may be elaborately carved with bowls inlaid with silver. Bowls may be of wood, soapstone, inlaid or carved in the form of various totemic power animals (an eagle with folded wings) or another sacred animal.

From the top down: Natural Tobacco, Calamus root, Sweetgrass and Tobacco, Tobacco seed. On the left: Sage; on the right: Red Willow bark. Cloths; blue for the sky and then the four colours representing humanity; the white, yellow, red and black races.



The pipe is disassembled into its component parts while being carried from one place to another. The pipe is never a "personal possession". It belongs to the community. The holder of the pipe is generally considered its custodian. While every native has the right to hold the pipe, in practise, the privilege must be earned in some religious way. The pipe is usually passed on to another custodian under specific fasting and cleansing rite regulations. There are pipes exclusively used by either men or women. Men's pipes become unclean if touched by women and vice-versa.

Pipe Ceremony

Pipe ceremonies constitute the primary group gatherings over

which Elders preside. Participants gather in a circle. A braid of sweetgrass (one of four sacred plants) is lit and burnt as an incense to purify worshippers, before the pipe is lit. Burning sweetgrass also symbolizes unity, the coming together of many hearts and minds as one person.

The Elder strikes a match, puts it to the end of the sweetgrass braid and fans the smouldering grass with an eagle's feather, to encourage smoke production. The Elder then goes from person to person in the circle where the smoke is drawn four times by hand gestures toward the head and down the body. The Elder must fan the glowing end to keep it burning properly or the material loses its spark.

Sacred Plants: Red Willow Bark, Sage, Calamus Root, Sweetgrass braid, Poplar leaves and Tobacco

The Elder then places tobacco in the pipe and offers it in the four sacred directions of the compass. Some Western tribes begin by making an offering to the West. Eastern Natives may propitiate the Spirit of the East whence comes the light of the sun at daybreak, who also gives guidance, direction and enlightenment. Then the Elder faces South where the guardian spirit of growth presides after winter is over. Next is West, the direction of the spirit gateway where reside the souls of those who have left this plane of existence. The spirit of the North concerned with healing and purification is then addressed.



Spirits will be asked for assistance in the main prayer, which may be specifically for one individual, a participant in the circle or for someone far away or someone who has passed over. The pipe, passed from person to person in the circle, might be offered to all creation, to those invisible spirit helpers who are always there to guide humanity. The last of the tobacco is offered to the Great Creator.

Another version of the Pipe Ceremony is the Sacred Circle which essentially follows the same procedures, but also allows a time period for individual participants to address the assembly.

Fasting

Fasting is a time-honoured way of quickening spirituality in which a growing number of Natives are partaking. An Elder provides the necessary ceremonial setting and conditions to guide the fasting member. Fasting means the total renunciation of food and drink for a specified time period. Health considerations are evaluated by both the Elder responsible and a physician prior to the fast.

Sweat Lodges

Used mainly for communal prayer purposes, the Sweat Lodge may also provide necessary ceremonial settings for spiritual healing, purification, as well as fasting. Most fasts require a sweat ceremony before and after the event.

Lodge construction varies from tribe to tribe. Generally, it is an igloo-shaped structure about five feet high, built in about one and a half hours from bent willow branches tied together with twine. The structure is then encased in blankets to preclude all light. A maximum of eight participants gather in the dark.

In the centre, there is a holy, consecrated virginal section of ground (untrampled by feet and untouched by waste material) blessed by an Elder with tobacco and sweetgrass. There, red hot stones heated in a fire outside the lodge are brought in and doused with water. A doorkeeper on the outside opens the lodge door four times, contributing four additional hot rocks (representing the four sacred directions) to the centre. A prepared pipe is also brought in.

Sweat Lodges may be dismantled after the ceremony is over, but often, they are left standing to

accommodate the next ceremony. Lodges may only be entered in the presence of an Elder.

Feasting

Some ceremonies such as "doctoring" sweat require the participant to eat a meal. There are specific rituals requiring special foods. Sacred food for the Ojibway for instance consist of wild rice, corn, strawberries and deer meat. Typical feast foods for the Cree from the prairies would be Bannock (Indian Bread), soup, wild game and fruit (particularly Saskatoon berries or mashed choke cherries). For a West Coast Indian, sacred foods might include fish prepared in a special way. Although foods may differ, their symbolic importance remains the same.

Rattles

Rattles are shaken to call up the spirit of life when someone is sick. The Elder also uses a rattle to summon the spirits governing the four directions to help participants who are seeking spiritual and physical cleansing to start a "new" life during a sweat lodge ceremony.

Drums

Drums represent the heartbeat of the nation, the pulse of the universe. Different sizes are used depending on "doctoring" or ceremonial purposes. Drums are sacred objects. Each drum has keeper to ensure no-one approaches it under the influence of alcohol or drugs. During ceremonies, no one may reach across it or place extraneous objects on it.

Eagle Whistles

When a dancer approaches a drum and blows an eagle bone whistle, the drum group responds by singing an appropriate song. The whistle is blown four times to honour the drums, the dancers and the spirit of the eagle. Four verses are sung, one for each time the whistle is blown. Large pow-wows have strict rules around how often this may occur during a pow-wow session.

Herbs / Incense

Sweetgrass, sage, cedar and tobacco encompass the four sacred plants. Burning these is a sign of deep spirituality in Native practises. Cedar and sage are burned to drive out negative forces when prayer is offered. Sweetgrass, which signifies kindness, is burned to invite good spirits to enter. Participants also use these purification rituals to smudge regalia, drums and other articles before taking part in a pow-wow.

The four plants are used in both individual and group ceremonies. Each plant was originally given to a specific tribe. Now they are used together or singly as incense which is generally ignited in an abalone shell or another type of container to be passed from person to person in the circle.

Medicine Pouches

Prescribed by an Elder, plant material can also be worn in a medicine pouch by a person seeking the mercy and protection of the spirits of the Four Directions. Elders caution Natives not to conceal any other substances in their pouches. To do so would make a mockery of their beliefs.

Peyote, a hallucinogenic material used by Natives in some parts of the US, historically is usually not considered a part of the Canadian Native culture. Other herbs and dried animal parts (diamond willow fungus, dried/powdered beaver testicles and buffalo droppings) are some other materials that may be burnt in ceremonial functions.

CEREMONIAL RITUALS

Pow-wow

Some say the name is derived from the Algonkian word meaning "to dream". Pow-wow an ancient

tradition among aboriginal peoples, is a time for celebrating and socializing after religious ceremonies. In some cultures, the pow-wow itself was a religious event, when families held naming and honouring ceremonies.

Giveaway

For instance, a family celebrating a member's formal entry into the dance circle, or wishing to commemorate the death of a loved one, often hosts a giveaway during a pow-wow. This tradition embodies the value of sharing with others. Gifts such as blankets, beadwork and crafts are given to friends and visitors followed by appropriate songs and dances.

Sweetgrass Braid



Today

Today's pow-wow is more of a social event, although honour ceremonies and other religious observances remain important parts of the celebration. Dancing, feasting and having fun, the old ways are remembered and pride is taken in traditional heritage as old friendships are renewed and new ones begun. Elders say that coming together in a joyous spirit is an important unifying and healing experience which brings together many nations in a celebration of life.

Honour Songs

Honour songs, as their name implies, are requested to honour particular individuals. Spectators should always stand and remove caps and hats when an honour song is intoned. The traditional pow-wow is more conducive to socializing and is not as demanding for participants. The hosts share the prizes with all registered singers and dancers. Whether competitive or traditional, pow-wows still bring people of all nations together in a celebration of life.

Grand Entry

Spectators should always stand and remove caps or hats during Grand Entry, Flag Songs and the Invocation. This beautiful parade of pride and colour starts off the pow-wow and each subsequent session of dancing. Preceded by the Eagle Staff, invited dignitaries and various categories of dancers join in the Grand Entry and dance to a special song rendered by the drum groups, following the path of the sun through the sky. The line-up is as follows: Eagle Staff, Flag bearers, dignitaries and princesses, men's traditional, grass and fancy dancers, followed by women's traditional, jingle and fancy dancers, youth and children in categorical order. All competitors must participate or risk losing points and/or elimination if they don't.

Eagle Staff

The Eagle Staff is an important symbol to many North American tribes. The eagle represents the Thunderbird spirits of the supernatural world who care for the inhabitants of our physical world. Qualities such as farsightedness, strength, speed, beauty and kindness are attributed to the eagle, which never kills wantonly, only to feed itself and its family. The Eagle Staff symbolizes reverence for the Creator and all of life.

Invocation

Any significant event is initiated with words of prayer by a respected Elder. Traditionally, First Nations never had "priests" as such but rather spiritual leaders. They are often offered tobacco with a request for prayer indicating respect and honour for that person and the higher power. Hunters and gatherers frequently expressed their gratitude with tobacco to show respect for the life they had taken.

Flag Songs

The respect shown to veterans or warriors is an integral part of Native culture, a tradition that harks back to the times when tribal welfare depended on warriors. In a society based on collectivity, veterans are honoured for self-sacrifice to their cause and their willingness to die so that others may live. Special songs are sung to honour veterans who fought under these flags. Veterans are also honoured as flag bearers, by being called upon to retrieve dropped eagle feathers and through various veterans' songs. Dropping an eagle's feather is serious business during a pow-wow. Retrieving it involves a ceremony - overseen by an Elder or respected spiritual leaders and/or warriors (veterans). All spectators should rise and remove hats or caps. No cameras may be used at this time.

Dancers - Mens Traditional

This dance originated in times when war parties returned to their villages to "dance out" the story of their battles, as well as hunters depicting stalking their prey after a successful hunt. The traditional dance outfit is frequently decorated with bead or quill work and features a circular bustle of eagle feathers. Traditional dancers may also carry objects symbolic of their warrior status such as shields, weapons, staffs or Medicine Wheels - reminders of the wisdom in the four directions, unity and the cycle of all things. Dancers are judged on how well they keep time to the music, follow the beat of the drum and stop with the music, both feet on the ground.

Mens Grass Dance

Contemporary grass dance outfits feature many colourful fringes in place of the grass tussocks that were originally tucked into their belts. Many dancers also wear a hair roach, a crow belt and carry an eagle bone whistle, emblems of the Omaha Society where the dance originated. Although it is a free-style type of dance, the troupe must follow the drum beat and stop with the music with both feet on the ground. Dancers also keep their heads moving in time to the beat to keep their roach crest feathers spinning.

Mens Fancy

Said to have originated in Oklahoma in the early 1900s, this dance was begun when promoters of native ceremonials asked native dancers to beautify their outfits for the spectators' benefit. Based on the same step as the traditional grass dances, the fancy dance also features increased speed, acrobatic steps and varied body movements. Dancers must also be able to follow the beat, stopping precisely at its end.

Sneakup

This specialty dance simulates warriors sneaking up on their prey or tracking an enemy. On the drum roll, they shake their bells and gesture while sneaking up on the centre of the dancing arena, stopping on the last beat of the verse and walking back to the perimeter. On the fourth rendition they continue as in a normal song.

Eagle Feathers



Womens Traditional

Some of the most beautiful outfits can be found in this category. Long dresses are frequently decorated with heavy beadwork, ribbons or shells. Beaded or concho belts are also worn as well as hair ties, earrings, chokers and necklaces. Most dancers carry a shawl, an eagle fan or a single feather. The dance consists of bending knees in time to the beat, giving slight up and down movements to the body while subtly shifting the feet to turn.

Womens Fancy Shawl

The fancy shawl outfit consists of a decorative knee-length dress, beaded moccasins with matching leggings, a fancy shawl and various jewellery pieces. The dance itself is extremely mobile with a great deal of spinning and fancy footwork. Dancers in this category must follow the drum beat and stop precisely at the end, both feet on the ground.

Jingle Dress

Jingle dancers wear knee-length cloth dresses featuring row upon row of small bells or jingles sewn to the fabric. Dancers follow the drumbeat to make their jingles sound with the lightest step possible. The sound should stop precisely on the drum beat.

Team Dance

Team dancing is a relatively new addition to the pow-wow. Dancing in a single style, team members must synchronize their movements. Dancers are judged on synchronization, their outfits and how well their steps are put together.

TREATMENT OF MEDICINE BUNDLES BY LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS

Once the Medicine Bundle has been touched by someone other than its designated guardian, it can no longer be used in its uncleansed condition. The custodian must again perform purification rites (which may take three or four days and involve the presence of different spiritual Elders) to restore the Bundle's sacredness. In other words, vital spiritual essence is lost when these items are not treated according to the respect they deserve.

In most cases, police and security officials have not been aware of the spiritual significance regarding the Bundle's contents. Nor have they been culturally sensitized enough to the Native Elders' regard of ceremonial accessories which must be treated with the utmost respect.

Spiritual Artifacts

A Manitoba Elder graciously provided some samples of a collection of spiritual artifacts used in sacred ceremonies. The collection, which appears in this guide, should not be construed as being "typical." Contents in Medicine Bundles may vary considerably taking into account the cultural diversity of Aboriginal First Nations across Canada and the U.S. Law enforcement officers are encouraged to contact Elders in their region to determine what spiritual artifacts and practises are current in their localities.

Description

Eagles' wings and feathers, rawhide gourds, drums, abalone shells, prayer cloths and prints are some of the more common objects in use, in addition to the pipe. Eagle wings and feathers are awarded for outstanding deeds. They may be worn in the hair or on a costume, but normally they are carried in the hand. Indians regard the eagle as a sacred bird. The eagle represents power, strength and loyalty. The

four sacred plants, sweetgrass, sage, cedar and tobacco or kinniekinnick (red willow shavings) are also often worn in a "medicine" pouch around the neck or pinned onto clothing. Elders may have additional sacred items such as bear claws on a thong or badges that have been given as gifts during ceremonies.

Searches

Male law enforcement officers may conduct a search of someone wearing these without incident if they ask the wearer to open the bundle. If the person is genuine, then the request will be granted. The spirituality of the bundle is only violated if it is touched or opened without the carrier's permission. It is therefore important that police officers be aware that spiritual items of religious significance should be treated with the proper respect and not be touched by anyone except the Elder/Custodian.

Female police officers should, whenever possible, have a male officer conduct this search. This is due to the belief that women, during their "moon time", are spiritually far more powerful than men and the simple act of viewing the items will cause them to be desecrated.

What is important to remember is that in ever increasing numbers, Natives are returning to their own heritage in expressing their religious beliefs. These sacred objects may be encountered with greater frequency now that spiritual Elders often travel great distances to conduct their sacred ceremonies. While keeping public safety in mind, security personnel and other law enforcement officials should endeavour to make themselves more aware of these traditions and the artifacts involved through increased cross-cultural training and awareness.



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