

Donald D. PEPION

TRADITIONAL MEDICINAL PRACTICES OF THE BLACKFEET INDIANS

Introduction

This presentation will discuss the medicinal practices of the Blackfeet Indians of Montana and Canada. The discourse begins by identifying how the Native American prevention and treatment models may differ from the United States disease oriented treatment modalities. The Blackfeet, as one of the tribal groups of the Blackfoot Confederacy, is introduced and the traditional, cultural geographic area is identified. Some Blackfeet Indian terminology is presented along with how social grouping integrates with medicinal practices. Medicine bundles, herbalists and healers, and Ookaan or Sundance ceremonies are briefly discussed. The nature of knowledge and the universe is explored to gain an awareness of the Blackfeet way of knowing.

Medicinal Practices of Indigenous Peoples of North America

Medical services in the United States are based upon a treatment model. The treatment of disease and illness has become a multi-million dollar industry. Physicians dispense a multitude of pharmaceuticals in the treatment process. Patients have come to believe and expect that there are miracle drugs to cure almost any medical problem or situation.

The indigenous people of North American have long been known as spiritual healers. Much of the indigenous peoples natural medicines such as roots and herbs used to treat illness and injury have been co-opted by the emigrants and marketed in their capitalistic society. However, in a gathering of non-Indian physicians and indigenous spiritual leaders in a conference, one tribal elder stated, "They [non-Native physicians] have the same medicine; they just don't know how to use it!"¹

Since I was the person who had facilitated this regional meeting of physicians and Native healers, I had to ponder this statement. After some reflection, I realized that he meant non-Natives only had the healing substance but not the spiritual ceremony that went with the treatment process.

Generally Native American medicinal practices include prevention as well as treatment. An indigenous person feeling physical, mental, emotional or spiritual dis-ease may seek assistance from elder practitioners.² In many tribes, a diagnosis of sorts through dialog or other processes with the patient may be made and the Native practitioner may then refer the individual to the appropriate person who deals with the sort of situation involved. However, in most cases a ceremony or ritual is carried out. The ritual or ceremony may be something as simplistic as prayer and incense. In some instances the healing may include things like an elaborate ceremony involving many other people in song, dance, and spiritual supplication. These kinds of ceremonies may sometimes take as long as a day or over a period of several days.

¹ After a Regional Indian Health Conference with a section devoted to medical physicians and traditional Indian medicine people in Billings Montana on September 22, 1989, an informal discussion was held with a group of indigenous medicine people and the author.

² The term elder in some North American tribes is used to denote respect for the status of a spiritual leader and/or ceremonialist. In many cases, the term 'elder' is not necessarily connected to age. The term is use to acknowledge wisdom, respect and status.

Introducing the Blackfeet

In this discussion I am going to examine the medicinal practices within the context of one tribal group. As a member of the Blackfeet tribe located on the border of Canada and United States under the Rocky Mountains, I am familiar with both contemporary and cultural medicinal practices of my tribe. However, we must bear in mind that there are over one-thousand tribal groups in the United States with many different languages and cultural ways. Although there are some regional cultural similarities, the indigenous people of North America are geographically and culturally diverse.

The Blackfeet are a federally recognized tribal group in the United States due to the enactment of a treaty in 1855. Thus, like most federally recognized tribes in the United States, they have limited sovereignty and a reservation area of 2.5 million acres. The reservation is under the Rocky Mountains to the west and the northern demarcation is the United States/Canadian international boundary. Over half of the 15,000 enrolled members of the tribe live on the reservation.³

The Blackfeet or Pikuni as they call themselves, are affiliated with the North Pikuni, Blood (Kainai) and North Blackfoot tribes located on the Canadian side of the international boundary (Ewers, 1958, 5-6). These tribes are commonly called the Blackfoot Confederacy. They all share the same language and culture as plains Indians. Upon the arrival of the Europeans, the Blackfoot Confederacy roamed an area the size of France under the Northern Rocky Mountain chain from the Saskatchewan River to the North in Canada and South as far as the Yellowstone River in the State of Montana.⁴

Traditional Medicinal Practices of the Blackfeet

The American English language term of “medicine man” has been integrated by many of the Native American tribes as a common term. In the Blackfoot language “medicine people” (since they may be male or female) translate better to “ceremonialists” or “holy people”. *Natowa’pinaa* is a holy man while *Natowa’paa-kii* is a female belonging to a religious order (Bastien, 2004). *Naatowpikoan* is like a priest or a male that belongs to a religious society. The Blackfoot peoples have social/ceremonial groupings commonly termed societies.⁵ The societies are age-graded in that individuals and their peers move through successively different groupings during their lifetimes. After thirty or forty years of age, the societies become more spiritually oriented with enormous amount rigorous learning of ritual.⁶

Although there are many different kinds of healing ceremonies and rituals, sometimes involving the use of herbs, roots and healing objects such as *iniskimix* (small sacred stones), the discussion here will be limited to significant medicinal or healing practices.

Medicine Bundles

Two the most spiritual societies are called *Naanamskaa aaquinimaa* (medicine pipe bundle) and *kisstaakii aaquinimaa* (beaver bundle).⁷ These societies practice intricate ceremonies containing much ritual involving supplication, song, and dance. The society’s members are initiated into a rigorous learning process sometimes lasting several years. Some society members eventually become the proprietors of the medicine bundle. The bundle itself

³ Blackfeet Nation website <http://www.blackfeetnation.com/>, accessed April 12, 2009.

⁴ Brian Reeves, PhD, personal communication, September 15, 1995 a Calgary Alberta Canada. Reeves is an archeologist associated with the University of Calgary. He is recognized as an authority on Blackfoot peoples.

⁵ For information on Blackfeet Societies see Clark Wissler, “Societies and Associations of the Blackfoot Indians”, (Washington, D. C.: Anthropological Papers American Museum of Natural History, Vol. XI, 1913), 425-426, 428.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For information on medicine bundles see Clark Wissler, “Ceremonial Bundles of the Blackfoot Indians” in *Social Organization and Ritualistic Ceremonies of the Blackfoot Indians*, (New York: AMS Press, 1912), 66-289.

contains many objects including things like animal and bird pelts, holy rocks, and ceremonial objects such as rattle, fire tongs, whistle and the most importantly the stem of the most holy smoking pipe.⁸

The bundle proprietors, usually a married couple, become holy people because of their status of being keepers of the powerful sacred bundle that contains items relative to the geneses of the people.⁹ The bundle has the power to heal through the actions of the holy bundle keepers. Through prayer and small rituals involving things like incense and face painting, a person requesting assistance may have a healing or sometimes a prevention of potential harm perceived through dreams or premonition. However, a more intense ceremony may be held involving a bundle opening ritual that includes the entire medicine bundle society in day long services of song, dance, and supplication. The larger ceremony may be held at the behest of the bundle keeper or upon request by individuals or family members.

In the medicine bundle ceremony, individuals with illness and injury, or premonition, may dance while holding the most holy pipe. This is the only time people other than the holy people may touch the pipe. As the drummers and singers chant the appropriate musical accompaniment the bundle keepers will ritually hand the most holy pipe to the person seeking healing. They will then dance four musical stanzas following the medicine bundle keepers in a semi-circle around the fire in the middle of a large tepee (sometimes the ceremony may be held in a house or building).

The medicine bundle ceremony (also called the medicine pipe ceremony) will sometimes be held in a large room of a home. However, the ceremonial circle is always precisely established with much protocol relative to such things as seating arrangements and placement of ritual accouterments. For example, the medicine bundle itself always sits to the west side of the circle. The female bundle keeper and her helpers (society members) sit to the south of the bundle within the circle. The male bundle keeper and male supporters (society members) sit on the north side of the bundle. An interesting phenomenon is the bundle keepers' former owners (bundle keepers), called their ceremonial parents, sit next to the bundle and actually conduct the ceremony. Also sitting in the ceremonial circle near the doorway on the east side are the once removed former bundle keepers whom are called the grandparents (who actually hold veto power of the ceremonies if something is inappropriate relative to the rituals).

The ceremonial circle is intricately established with an earthen altar where incense appropriate to the ceremony is burned. The altar in a house ceremony is an earthen filled box but it always sets in front of the medicine bundle facing the center of circle within reaching distance of those conducting the ceremony. It is taboo for anyone to cross between the altar and the conducting ceremonialists. Since the only female ceremonialist can handle objects in the bundle, she must be the person to hand the object (such as the holy pipe) to the male side to be ritualistically cleansed and purified with the incense.

In the case of the healing ritual dance, the male and female bundle keepers rise and stand on the south or male side of the circle. Depending on the gender of the patient, the male or female bundle keeper will hand the medicine pipe to the individual seeking assistance.¹⁰

⁸ Several authors have written about the medicine pipe ceremonies including: George Bird Grinnell, "Medicine Pipes and Healing", *Blackfoot Lodge Tales: The Story of a Prairie People*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962) 277-281; John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 170-173; Reg Crowshoe and Sybille Manneschmidt, "The Thunder Medicine Pipe", *AKAK'STIMAN: A Blackfoot Framework for Decision Making About Health Administration and Services*, (Brockton Alberta Canada: Keep Our Circle Strong Project, 1997), 23-24. Walter McClintock, *Blackfoot Medicine-Pipe Ceremony*, (Los Angeles, Southwest Museum Leaflets, Number 21 [no date]), 9.

⁹ Beverly Hungry personal communication on May 27, 1999, Browning, Montana.

¹⁰ Reg Crowshoe personal communication on April 10, 1999, Stand Off, Alberta Canada.

Since this is a holy ceremony, a pathway of blankets are placed on the ground (or floor) in the dance circle starting on the north (male side) and ending on the south (female) side. As the drumming and singing begins, the bundle keeper (male or female depending on the gender of the patient) will dance moving in the semi-circle with the patient beside them. The drumming and singing will temporarily halt and the pipe stem is handed to the patient who then dances three more stanzas in the semi-circle until they reach the female side of the circle. As they pass by the fire on the south side, they will dance in front of the four or more drummers and singers who ceremonially sit in-between the women and the fire. At the end of the dance, the medicine pipe is then handed to one of the females nearest the bundle. This individual then successively hands it to the next female to their left until it reaches the primary female ceremonialist who places it back in the bundle. As each female handles the bundle, they individually offer prayers while cradling and hugging the medicine pipe.¹¹

At the end of the ceremony, the patient and their family members provide gifts of blankets (including the blankets placed on the ground) and other articles such as money to society members and the ceremonialists (Kehoe, 1980, 25). Sometimes in a bundle opening ceremony, several people may have made previous requests to dance with the medicine pipe. Some of the people dancing with the pipe may have made promises or vows to participate in the ceremony to allay harm such as a son or daughter participating in military service, especially during conflict time.

As a witness to these kinds of ceremonies, I have observed people obtain amelioration of their illness or injury. The healing may not be immediate but it may take place over a period of time, such as several days or weeks. These kinds of healings are unexplainable in the non-Indian's way of scientific method. Nevertheless, the Pikuni unquestionably accept this process of healing as a part of the way of knowing.

Herbalists and other Healers

In the Blackfeet way, there are individuals who have received the power to heal through a dream or vision. Sometimes the spiritual message may involve the use of herbs, roots, or other objects such a wing or feather of a certain bird. In the dream or vision, an animal, bird, or object may bring the message that includes the use of certain songs and ritualistic ways of administering the medicine.

Wilbert Fish, a well known herbalist on the Blackfeet Indian reservation, indicated that there are certain herbs and roots he calls "everybody's" medicine, while there are certain kinds of healing plants that are given to specific people in a spiritual way.¹² He is known to utilize many different kinds of plant medicines in various kinds of ways depending on the injury, illness or psychological condition or need of the patient. He prepares various kinds of compounds such as salves, teas, and compounds that are administered orally or externally depending on the illness or injury.

The Blackfeet have many protocols and taboos regarding approaching medicine people. For example, it is a standard practice to offer a gift such as money, food, or blankets to a medicine person before requesting assistance. The individual will make a generalized request for assistance while handing the gifts to the medicine person. In most cases, the medicine person will than usually institute an incense ritual involving a small coal from a stove or firebox and placed on a dirt altar in a small, dirt filled box or container. After prayer and incense smudging of the selves, the medicine person will than expect the patient to explain their problem or situation. The medicine person may then administer a remedy. The remedy usually involves

¹¹ Author's personal observation of George and Molly Kicking Woman medicine pipe ceremony in Browning Montana on May 10, 1998.

¹² Wibert Fish, personal communication on October 26, 1990, Browning, Montana.

further rituals of such things as prayer and song along with administering the appropriate substance in a specified way. However, there may be times when the individual will be “prayed over” and possibly given an amulet for further protection and healing.

In some cases, an individual may be referred to someone who is a spiritual healer. One common method of healing is the sweat lodge ceremony. In this ceremony, the ceremonialist conducts song and prayer in a nine to twelve foot diameter willow frame hut covered with canvas or other materials that blocks out the light. Heated rocks are brought into the hut and water is splashed on them to create a sauna or steam bath type of atmosphere. In the Blackfeet way, the sweat lodge ceremony is usually considered a male cleansing ceremony. However, the men in the ceremony may pray for anyone needing or requesting assistance in addition to the person who may be there for specific healing or prevention requests.

Blackfeet Ookaan or Sundance

The Blackfeet Ookaan, commonly called the sundance by non-natives, is an annual communal ceremony that is dedicated to continuing and maintaining the life of the people (Pikuni).¹³ Before 1900, the Ookaan ceremony was the only time the bands of the Blackfoot came together in one large gathering. During middle or late summer, when the berries ripen, the people would travel to a common camping area. A large camping circle would surround a large open area where the Ookaan ceremonies would commence. The actual ceremonial activities last four days but the encampment may occur several days before the events (Bullchild, 1985, 328).

The Ookaan ceremonies are a conglomeration of many rituals that are complex and interrelated. In fact, the instigation of the Ookaan begins several months prior to summer by a female tribal member making a vow to participate as the primary conductor that is a central figure to the event (Ewers, 1958, 175). The female will go through some preparatory ceremonies several months prior to the Ookaan. One of the important rituals is her public announcement to “sit holy” during the late summer Ookaan ceremonies. This public announcement includes her statement that she is faithful and virtuous person who has lived a life in accordance with the social mores of the Pikuni. One of the preparatory rituals involves cutting and drying of buffalo (or beef) tongues that will be used in the late summer ceremonies of the Ookaan (Ewers, 1958, 176).

As the people begin to form the camp circle for the Ookaan, the holy woman and her spouse, or brother if unmarried, will set up a special tepee just inside the camp circle on the west end. In this tepee, the couple will participate in some mostly secret rituals involving such things as the acquisition sanctified of articles that will be transferred from a previous couple who carried out the rites during the previous year.¹⁴ The elder ceremonialists, who have the necessary credentials, will conduct the semi-secret rituals in what is now called the holy tepee. During these four day ceremonial rituals in the tepee, the couple will institute a fast and only receive a sip of water twice a day.

While the holy woman and partner are fasting, praying, and participating in the holy tepee rituals, the people will be preparing a structure in the middle of the camp circle. The structure consists of a circular post and pole frame with rafters that overlap in the fork of a large tree that

¹³ An extensive pictorial history of the Ookaan by Adolph Hungry-Wolf is in “Section Twelve: The Okan, Medicine Lodge, or Sun Dance”, *Blackfoot Papers: Volume Two, Pikuni Ceremonial Life*, (Skookumchuk, British Columbia: The Good Medicine Cultural Foundation, 2006), 507-682.

¹⁴ Information on transfer rituals in John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 104-105, 127, 163-165, 177; Clark Wissler, *Societies and Dance Associations of the Blackfoot Indians*, (Washington, D. C.: Anthropological Papers American Museum of Natural History, Vol. XI, 1913), 425-426, 428; Betty Bastien iterates the processes of “transfer of knowledge and skill to the next generation” through the “practice of ceremonial transfers” in *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitapipi* [Blackfoot people], (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004) 140-142, 146-148.

has been cut and set in the middle of the rotunda. The construction of the Ookaan is also a series of intricate rituals that involve the roles of several societies and ceremonialists (Grinnell, 1962, 263-268).

On the fourth day, the holy couple will emerge from the holy teepee in a small entourage consisting of their male and female helpers along with the appropriate ceremonialists. The procession will then enter a teepee like structure that is not covered on one side. At this point, most of the people in the teepee village have gathered in the center near the Ookaan structure. The holy couple's helpers will then give every person a piece of the dried tongue. The holy people then lead offering prayers and everyone places a small piece of the dried tongue in the ground and they eat the remainder (Ewers, 1958, 179).

The people in the encampment then carry a piece of cloth material that has been tied to an approximate two square foot willow frame for the holy people to hold and consecrate by way of prayer. Each person with the cloth offering then have their face painted in a specific way by the holy people. One ceremonialist has indicated that the face is painted so the creator of all things will recognize and acknowledge the individuals prayers and offerings.¹⁵

When the holy people complete their rituals, the societies will proceed with raising the large forked tree (about twenty feet in length and three to four feet in diameter) into a pre-dug hole three to four feet deep. When the center tree is raised and set in the ground the various tribal bands will enter from their respective camping sites in the teepee circle and place a rafter tree limb in the fork of the middle tree. The butt end of the rafter will set on a six to eight feet high post and pole fence like structure that has been previously constructed around the center. This aspect of the Ookaan ceremony is conducted with much reverence, prayer and song. It is significant that whole camp participates in this aspect of the Ookaan ceremonies.

After the rafters have been ritualistically placed, the societies tie the cloth offerings to the sun on the center tree and the rafters. It is then the time for the various societies to dance and sing in the middle of Ookaan lodge around the center tree.

This cursory explanation of a major portion of the Ookaan ceremonies does not include many related and sometimes simultaneous rituals related to the "sundance". A fuller description is beyond the scope of this paper.

A major purpose of the Ookaan ceremonies has to do with maintaining the health and welfare of the people. Yet the Ookaan is more about continuation in a more cosmic sense, in that the prayers, supplications, and offerings are about maintaining and continuing a universal condition. The fasting and prayers petition Natosi, the sun, and other deities to continue the lives of all things such as plants and animals. The balance, interconnectedness, and relativity of spiritual alliances are imperative to the natural and supernatural world. The connectedness and wholeness of the existence of tribal being and their interaction and relationship with collective universality is the essence of life. The survival of the people and their relationship with the universe is the mainstay of the Ookaan ceremonies.

During the ceremonies, individuals and societies will make offerings at the center post (tree) of the Ookaan as a way of petitioning for health and wellness. The societies and individuals will conduct various rituals involving song and dance in the Ookaan. Individuals will bring offerings such as the cloth goods and tie them to the center post. People will request healings and blessings as they make their offerings.

Blackfeet Ontology [or cosmology]

In the Blackfeet way of knowing, power and information is received in spiritual ways. In a study of ceremonial learning an elder ceremonialist, Alan Pard stated that "Ceremony is a re-

¹⁵ George G. Kipp, a well known medicine bundle keeper on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in a personal communication with the author at Badger Creek Montana on August 4, 1995.

enactment of the genesis” (Pepion, 1999, 82-83). Thus, the origin accounts are the basis of how knowledge and ceremony was given to the people. According to Reg Crowshoe, a North Peigan ceremonialist, the ancient stories of oral tradition has been handed down through many, many, generations and things like the medicine pipe were given to the people from thunder in mysterious ways (Pepion, 1999, 86-87). Some of the accounts are only narrated in specified contexts and seasons because of the respect for the sacredness associated with certain ceremonial objects such as the medicine pipe.

Other genesis accounts are shared openly with people so they may learn how the ceremonial ways including such things as the Ookaan or commonly called ‘Sundance’ came to the Pikuni. A well respected ceremonial elder, Molly Kicking Woman, has recounted the story of Paiyo (Scarface) and how he traveled in mysterious ways to visit Natosi (The Sun) and brought back the male part of the Ookaan ceremonies (Pepion, 1999, 89-90). Others like Reg Crowshoe, a North Pikuni ceremonialist relates the genesis of how Woman-who-married-a-star brought back the female side of the Ookaan (Pepion, 1999, 88-89).

The Blackfeet epistemology is based on the premise of cosmological interrelatedness. Thus, all entities throughout the universe have a spiritual nature and communication with all things occurs in a supernatural way. Humankind is on the same plane or dimension with all other entities within the universe. However, the manifestation of communication and spiritual presence between entities in most cases is a shielded dimension that may only be revealed on a segregated basis. Some entities have a gift of power, energy, or a supernatural force to will an occurrence such as a healing or deterrence of causality. Sometimes this force or power may become operational and function through another entity such as a human being. The operational function of healing or prevention may have specific criteria such as ritualistic rites of song, dance, movement, or other contextual requisites.

In the case of the medicine bundle, each of the entities within the bundle has its own song, dance, and ritual. Each object has its own genesis account. In the medicine bundle society, each member participates in rites-of-passage that ritualistically gives them the knowledge, authority, and sanction to take part in aspects of the ceremony involving various objects in the bundle. Each member throughout their lifetimes is thus continually obtaining more knowledge through accumulation of these ritual transfers (Crowshoe and Manneschmidt, 1997, 29-33). In keeping with the holistic nature of the genesis accounts, each society member participates in aspects of the ceremony relative to their status. Thus, it takes almost all society members to conduct a ceremony.

Conclusion

The traditional cultural medicinal practices of the Blackfeet are keenly integrated with spirituality. Religion with the Blackfeet is not a concept that can be separated from their way of life. The language and way of knowing does not separate spirituality from the secular life. As indicated by one of the elders, “Ceremony is a reenactment of the genesis”, thus origin narratives, ritual, and medicinal practices are interconnected in the belief system and way of knowing. Although the pharmacology has been in many cases borrowed by the emigrants, the Blackfeet continue to maintain the spiritual connection to administering medicine.

The Blackfeet ceremony reveals that in most cases collectivism is a priority over individualism. In most cases, it not only requires gender equity to conduct healing ceremonies but it also necessitates social/ceremonial group involvement. The Blackfeet way of knowing challenges the scientific method. Scientific method utilizes abstract concepts related to quantification that are not existent to indigenous knowledge. On the other hand, those immersed in the scientific method many times reject the indigenous way of knowing.

Recommendations

Native ways of knowing is currently an important issue in academics. Native philosophy is beginning to be articulated by Native authors such as Vine Deloria, Jr. and Dan Wildcat (2001, 12-15, 96), Gregory Cajete (1994, 64-66, 75-83) and others.¹⁶ Native scholars such as Marie Battiste question the discriminatory nature of Eurocentric knowledge against indigenous knowledge (2008, 85-91). Other non-Native scholars like Joe L. Kincheloe are beginning to “gain a new respect for the genius of indigenous epistemologies and ontologies” and espouses the “value of non-Western knowledge (2006, 181-184)”. Henry A. Giroux speaks to the need to “rethink the politics of multiculturalism” and “challenging the narratives of national identity, culture, and ethnicity” to “examine, acknowledge and unlearn their [educators] own privilege (1997, 236)”.

Indigenous knowledge needs to be a part of the research and learning process in academics. Indigenous scholars are needed to research and articulate the valuable aspects of indigenous knowledge. However, it is imperative that indigenous scholars and people establish clear boundaries for research and publication. More importantly, the academies need to respect that some knowledge is sacred and cannot be revealed.

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¹⁶ Deloria espouses “indigenous metaphysics” relative to a holistic tribal view of the relatedness and connectedness of all things and power in physical places. Wildcat builds off Deloria’s relativity and power by positing that Native philosophy entails respecting and sustaining an ecosystem wherein humankind is an equal part of the system. Gregory Cajete reinforces a tribal worldview of holistic ecology as reflected through tribal genesis and ceremony.

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