

## **COSMOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PAN-INDIAN SACRED PIPE RITUAL**

JORDAN PAPER,  
Religious Studies Program,  
242 Vanier College,  
York University,  
4700 Keele Street,  
North York, Ontario,  
Canada, M3J 1P3.

### **ABSTRACT/RESUME**

The author reviews the characteristics of pipe ceremonies among North American Native cultures, noting the cosmological significance of the sacred pipe. He notes the conception of the cosmos as being oriented in all directions, rather than simply above, as in the European focus.

L'auteur étudie les caractéristiques des cérémonies de pipe dans les cultures autochtones de l'Amérique du Nord, et constate la signification cosmologique de la pipe sacrée. Il constate que la conception du cosmos s'oriente vers toutes les directions, et non seulement vers le haut, comme l'indique la pensée européenne.

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The cosmology of a culture can generally be determined from the religion, philosophy or theoretical science of that culture. In seeking cosmology within religion, the tendency is to focus on myth. However, in regard to Native American religions, Hultkrantz (1979) has pointed out that myth and ritual are often separate, and that religion can best be understood through the latter. Western culture also intimately relates cosmology and cosmogony. This relationship assumes a linear concept of time with an emphasis on beginnings, which is itself particularly Western. In many North American Native cultures, except for the probable post-contact addition of Genesis parallels to migration myths (e.g., *Walum Olum*, 1954, and Waters, 1963; see Paper, 1983), the earth, not the cosmos as a whole, is created or recreated on the water, and these myths are often separate from cosmological understanding.

Native American rituals are based, in part, on an implicit as well as explicit cosmological understanding. An analysis of ritual movements within their symbolic contexts can lead to an understanding of this underlying cosmology. While most rituals are mono-cultural, there are major pan-Indian rituals that undoubtedly were extant prior to the arrival of Europeans. These rituals include sweat ceremonials, ubiquitous to most of the Americas, and the ritual of the "sacred pipe," originally particular to the central and eastern parts of North America.

### The Sacred Pipe and Its Ritual

I have recently *completed* a comprehensive study of the pan-Indian sacred pipe based on both the ethnographic data and the major museum collections (Paper, 1986). In the following, I will summarize those aspects of the research pertinent to this study.

The use of smoking pipes in the Americas is not only pervasive but of considerable antiquity; pipes relevant to the modern pipe appear approximately 2,500 years ago and direct antecedents are 1,500 years old. Whenever there is a cultural context, it is of a religious nature (Robicsek, 1978). The centrality of the pipe to the major myths of a number of Native American cultures (Black Elk, 1953; Cooper, 1957) further indicates the antiquity of the pipe. It is generally accepted by scholars of Native American religions that pipe rituals in general, along with the sweat lodge, are the most common rituals throughout Native North America (Hultkrantz, 1984).<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of a convenient term, I will call all separate-stemmed pipes "sacred pipes," including the calumet when the bowl is present.<sup>2</sup> (Ignoring the original French use, but following convention, I reserve the term calumet for the elaborately feathered stem used in ritual similar to the Pawnee *hako*.) Of course, all pipes used in Native ceremonials are considered sacred pipes,

but pipes such as cloudblowers and the Iroquoian type can be otherwise identified as well.

The distinguishing characteristic of the sacred pipe is that the bowl is separable from the stem and the two parts are kept apart except during ritual use. Each part as well as the joining of the two is of considerable symbolic significance. The pipe itself is invariably considered holy and treated with veneration.

This pipe, after the adoption of the horse but prior to the contemporary spread throughout Native cultures in sub-arctic North America, had a range from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic and from the Gulf of Mexico to James Bay. It did not penetrate to the Pacific coast where tubular pipes continued in use, nor among the cultures of the Southwest, where tubular pipes, termed "cloudblowers," and elbow pipes with a short reed stem continue in ritual use. In some cultures, the separate-stemmed pipe was and continues to be primarily used in a pan-Indian ritual context, as in Iroquoian cultures which had their own unique pipe form with a different ritual.

The archaeological record presents evidence for long-distance trade between Native cultures in North America for the last several thousand years: copper from the upper Great Lakes and shells from both coasts are found in cultural contexts thousands of miles from their origins. Given that separate cultures only understand their own members as equals, intercultural relations require rituals to enable peaceful contact to take place. These are often rituals of adoption. From the ethnohistorical record, it is clear that the sacred pipe, along with gift exchange, was central to such rituals in much of North America.

What is essential to the ritual of the sacred pipe is not a dance or adoption ritual per se, which previous studies have emphasized (for example, Fenton, 1953) and which are supplemental to the pipe itself, but the very rituals involving the use of the pipe. In all ethnohistoric descriptions of the smoking of the pipe, there is sufficient commonality to indicate a consistent pattern throughout North America; for example, Romero among the Apache in 1660 (Kesseil, 1978:14), Marquette among the Illinois in 1673, Bartram and Charlevoix among the Natchez in the late 1700's, Carver among the Iroquois in 1766, Lewis and Clark among the Tetons in 1804, and Long among the Omaha in the early 1800's (McGuire, 1899:552, 563-568).

The rituals described in the earliest ethnohistorical accounts listed above are in accord with contemporary pan-Indian pipe ritual. Through the medium of the pipe the smoke is offered to spirits in the sacred directions: the four directions, zenith and nadir.<sup>3</sup> Often the bowl is lowered to touch the Earth as noted by Kurz in 1851 (1937:262) in regard to a Crow, and the smoke is passed over the smoker to consecrate oneself, first noted by White

in 1633 in Maryland (McGuire, 1899:549). It is the ritual itself that accounts for the specific form of the sacred pipe. The long stem enables the pipe to be offered with both hands, the stem pointed in the direction of the spirits. The early European descriptions, not written by ethnologists, do not always contain the full ritual, but they all specify that the sacred pipe was pointed in the direction of the spirits. Hence, from the earliest recording to the present, whenever and wherever the sacred pipe was used, the basic ritual was the same.

Contrary to the view that there was no general ideology in much of Native North America (Gill, 1982:35), the widespread use of tobacco as the primary sacrificial offering, let alone the early widespread specific ritual for offering it, in and of itself indicates a common ideological foundation. Brose (1985:67), in referring to the period of the monitor pipe (200 B.C. - 500 A.D.), points out that the ritual of inter-group exchange must have been "widely perceived as carrying a powerful *and* commonly accepted ideological message concerning relationships between society and the natural and supernatural worlds." The ritual of the sacred pipe, at least six hundred and probably fifteen hundred years in age, requires a specific cosmological understanding that continues to the present.

The fact that contemporary pan-Indian pipe ritual is in accord with ethnohistorical descriptions from the earliest records allows us to assume that this ritual is as old as the sacred pipe. Contemporary symbolism, when comparison is possible, is equally old. For example, the cross within a circle, representing the four directions in relation to the journey of the sun and the seasons, is found in Mississippian cultures, ca. 1000-1600 A.D. (see Brose, Brown and Penny, 1985:108 [fig. 15] and 145 [pl. 105]). The four points on prowed disc pipes (1200-1600 A.D.) as well as the presence of four-directions symbolism on a monitor pipe (West, 1934) indicates this understanding to be at least two millennia in age. Hence, one may assume that contemporary cosmological understanding in relation to the sacred pipe, at a minimum, relates to earlier conceptions.<sup>4</sup>

### **Cosmology Implicit in Sacred Pipe Ritual**

Sacred pipe ritual centers on the pipe itself; as the pipe is passed around the circle, so the center passes with it. The pipe is always at the center of the cosmos. The smoke is offered in all directions radiating outward from the pipe. This centering of the cosmos about the primary ritual feature at the time of the ritual is typical of Native American religions; for example, the center pole of the thirst (or sun) dance, the fire of ritual lodges, the pit in the sweat lodge and the kiva.

The bowl of the pipe is a sacrificial vessel that itself is a miniature cosmos. Often Tobacco<sup>5</sup> is added pinch by pinch, each explicitly dedicated to the sacred directions as well as animals and spirits, both therio and non-theriomorphic (as part of one's relations), thus bringing the entire cosmos into the bowl itself. The pipe stem, some older ones decorated with a striped design symbolic of the trachea, directs the offering towards the spirits. Eagle feathers may be hung from the stem to further symbolize the sending of the smoke and the accompanying vocal (or silent) petitions to the sacred persons. The primary smoker directs the smoke offering by pointing the stem towards the spiritual recipients, either before or after the pipe is lit. Subsequent smokers may offer the smoke with their mouth as well as by raising the pipe skyward, touching it to the ground, and turning the pipe in a circle.<sup>6</sup>

The cosmos surrounding the pipe is spherical rather than circular or hemispheric. The offerings are directed towards the four cardinal directions (in a few cultures, the semi-cardinal directions), the zenith and the nadir (the order varies). Euro-American observers often miss the totality of the directions because they do not observe the totality of the ritual movements, including the filling of the pipe. In subsequent smokers, the zenith is often indicated by motioning the pipe towards the sky, and the nadir, by touching the bowl of the pipe to the ground. The touching is appropriate because the bowl itself is understood as female as is the Earth.

In communal smoking, the ritual also indicates the cosmos of social relationships. At the center is the self, the one holding the pipe. Next come the circles<sup>7</sup> of human relationships: family, clan and "nation." Further outward is the sphere of animal relations: those who walk on the earth in the four directions, those who fly in the sky above, and those who crawl through the earth below or swim in the sea. Finally there is the sphere of the most powerful spirits: the four directions/winds, the sky and the earth/sea. Together these four spheres of being form "all my relations."

Fundamental to cosmological understanding is the pairing of female and male spiritual powers which, when combined, results in creation. The pipe itself consists of two parts, the bowl which is symbolically female and the stem which is male. It is only when the stem is inserted in the bowl that the pipe is potent, and it for this reason that the pipe is only joined at the beginning of the ceremony, and its separation indicates the termination of the ritual. Zenith and nadir, sky and earth/water, respectively are male and female; in their conjoining, plants and living creatures are created. So too the pipe bowl, with few exceptions, is of stone or clay, the substance of the female Earth, and the stem is usually of wood, from the procreated trees which rise towards the Sky.

However, the most common understanding of the zenith is more complex. For while the day sky, the Sun, the West Wind and the Thunder Beings are male, the night sky, in particular the Moon, is female. So too while the Four Directions are Grandfathers, the south, the direction of growth and nurture, may be understood as female.

Once one goes beyond the basics of the directions, one is involved with mono-cultural understandings. Specific symbolic and mythic understanding of the meanings of the directions varies from culture to culture, even sub-culture to sub-culture. However, the East and West are generally understood from the significance of the sun's path, symbolically equated with the path of life, as is the pipe stem itself. Accordingly, the ritual leader in a pipe ceremony normally faces East, the direction of the rising sun. The commonality of a fundamental cosmological understanding over most, if not all of, North America, despite major linguistic and cultural ecological differences, helps explain why different Native American cultures could so readily borrow rituals from each other as well as maintain the common ritual of the sacred pipe.

### **Comparison with Sweat Lodge**

Even more widespread than the ritual of the sacred pipe is the ritual frequently referred to in English as "sweat lodge." Although the ritual is usually part of all other major ceremonies, most ethnographic descriptions, where they mention sweat lodge at all, due to ethnocentrism, misunderstand the ritual as hygienic practice, rather than a potent, communal ritual of confession, catharsis, decision-making, and direct communication with *sacred* beings. The following description is a generalized summary from northern North American rituals, limited to those aspects relevant to the comparison.<sup>8</sup>

The sweat lodge is a dome-shaped structure, of which, as with any Native American ritual, every part has symbolic significance. The lodge is constructed from poles emphasizing the number four and its multiples, oriented toward the cardinal directions, with a low entrance usually facing the East, the direction of the rising sun, symbolic of the beginning of life and understanding. In the center, a round pit is dug, the earth of which is used to form an altar east of the sweat lodge. Between the altar and the lodge is the fire, symbolic of the Sun, which heats the stones used in the sweat ritual. When in use, the lodge is completely covered so it is light-tight.

The participants sit on evergreen branches or sage laid on the Earth. If there are a number of participants, four are delegated as gatekeepers of the Four Directions, although there is but one physical opening, itself covered during the ritual. The pit is understood as the womb of the Earth in which are placed the Grandfathers, the red-hot rocks<sup>9</sup> which on taking on the ener-

gy of the fire, represent the Sun as well as all other Grandfathers. The Grandfathers are sprayed with water, the life-fluid of the Earth. From these actions comes regeneration. At the conclusion of the complex ritual, the participants crawl from the dark womb through the narrow opening, cramped, hot, wet, yet inspired. Born anew, they greet each other and those outside as reborn persons.

Hence, the symbolism and ritual of the sweat lodge indicates the same cosmology as the ritual of the sacred pipe: the cosmos of the Four Directions, male zenith and female nadir, the latter two representing the creative forces of the cosmos. The commonality of the cosmological understanding of the sweat lodge with the ritual of the sacred pipe further points towards this understanding being fundamental to Native American cultures.

### **Comparative Cosmology**

The cosmology described in the preceding is not unique to Native American cultures. For example, Chinese culture, from its earliest writings (ca. 1000 B.C.) to the present, evidences a similar understanding. As the early records date from the time of kingship, there are, of course, differences from the less institutionalized Native American cultures in which one finds the pan-Indian sacred pipe complex. The cosmos is understood from two perspectives: horizontal and vertical.

From the horizontal perspective, there is a focus on the four directions, the center being the capital of the king - "the center of the four quarters" (Karlgrén, 1950:266). Each of the directions has its particular symbolic complex.

The vertical axis consists of a male zenith (Heaven) and female nadir (Earth). Everything exists as a result of the creative joining between the two. Chinese culture being anthropocentric, this conjoining results in the triad of Heaven, Humans and Earth.

Although the vertical formulation is ideologically more significant than the horizontal, the latter does have ritual significance. For example, since the mid-fifteenth century, the cosmological altars in Beijing surround the Imperial Palace in the four cardinal directions: in the south, the Altar to Heaven; in the west, the Altar to the Moon; in the north, the Altar to Earth; and in the east, the Altar to the Sun. The zenith and nadir are represented at the gates of the palace with, respectively, the Ancestral Temple and the Altar to the Soil.

Other cultures, for example, Polynesian, could also be brought in for comparison, but the point is not one of diffusion. Rather, this commonality of cosmological conception can be understood as pointing towards a widespread human perception of the cosmos as being oriented in all direc-

tions, rather than the Western focus on the direction above, as well as creation being the result of the joining of the Earth Mother with the Sky Father.

### NOTES

1. For a bibliographic survey, see Steinmetz, 1984.
2. My distinction is similar to that of Hall (1983:51), except I include round as well as flat stemmed pipes.
3. Even in non-separate-stemmed pipe contexts, this ritual is observed, as among the Hopi (McGuire, 1899:570).
4. I reject the method which assumes that that which is not described in Euro-American writings could not have existed.
5. A general term for sacred plants used in the smoke offering, including tobacco itself, bearberry leaves, the inner bark of red willow and sumac leaves.
6. It should be understood that I am only presenting those aspects of a rich ritual complex relevant to the discussion.
7. In cultures using square or rectangular ceremonial structures, circles may be replaced by angular figures.
8. For modern descriptions, see Black Elk (1953: chapter 4) for Lakota and Benton-Banai (1979: chapter 12) for the Ojibwa.
9. As substances of the earth, stones and rocks are female. It is the heat of the fire, symbolic of the Sun, captured in the rocks that is male.

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