

Beliefs of the plain indians

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The Plain Indians led a life dedicated to their religious and spiritual beliefs and to their traditions and in this section I will be examining some of these beliefs and traditions and will be explaining them. A belief that was shared by almost all the Indian tribes across the plains was the belief in a Supreme Being or god known as the Great Spirit or Waken Tanka.

They believed that he was all powerful and that he was the creator of the whole of nature, which can explain the Indian's respect and love for all living things and nature because according to their beliefs all living things were the creation of the Great Spirit so all should be valued " The Sioux was a true lover of nature. He loved the earth and all things of the earth... Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky and water was a real and active belief. " (Sioux Chief Luther Standing Bear, Land of the Spotted Eagle, Houghton Mifflin 1933).

Also they believed that the Great Spirit lived in the Happy Hunting Ground - a beautiful country beyond the skies and that if they served the Great Spirit well during their lifetime they would go to the Happy Hunting Ground when they die. (Extracts from The American West 1840 - 1895, R. A. Rees and S. J. Styles). The desire to go the Happy Hunting Ground when they died was shared by all Indians. As well as believing in the one Great Spirit, the Plains Indians believed that all creations of the Great Spirit had spirits of their own. This included animals, birds, fish and plants, as well as human beings.

Even the rocks, trees and streams had spirits. (Extracts from The American West 1840 - 1895, The Struggle For The Plains - a study in depth, Martin Shephard). Spirits were very important to the Plain Indians as they believed

that they had had very specific purposes and they had many uses for them. They honoured them and attempted to contact them in many ways and had many beliefs about them. In this section I will be explaining some of these ceremonies and beliefs in great detail. Firstly, the Plain Indians were convinced that the power of the earth always moved and worked in circles.

Circles came to have incredible importance and significance to the Indians. They believed that circles were all around them - the sky was round and so was the sun; the wind whirled in circles; and the seasons formed one big circle, always coming back to where they started. (Extracts from *The American West 1840 - 1895*, R. A. Rees and S. J. Styles). Most importantly they believed in the circle of life, that all life had a circle even man " Even the life of a man was a circle, beginning with childhood and ending up with very old people behaving like children".

Because of their belief that everything natural works in circles they surrounded themselves with circles and everything they made or did was in circles. " Everything an Indian does is a circle, and that is because the power of the world works in circles, even the seasons form a great circle, and come back to where they were before. Our tipis are round, like bird's nest, and they were set in a circle, the nations hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant us to raise our children". (A Black Elk Plain Indian).

They did all this because they believe if they worked with nature's circles and not against them, then their power would become the Indian's power. A Plain Indian's warrior's robe depicting the Great circle of life made from deer hide. Secondly, they believed that man was no more important than any other

man in the world and that everything was equal. Even the council members and leaders of the tribe were no more significant than the other tribe members. Also they believed that their ancestors spirits are reincarnated as the animals spirits that lived in their time.

So if they did not respect nature and everything made by Great Spirit, it would be like stating that they were more important than their ancestors, who without they would not exist. This is why they had such respect for every living thing and its supports the clash between the whites and the Indians because the whites killed simply because they could. Thirdly, the Indians believed that the spirits would appear to them in visions. They believed that it was through these visions that they could come to contact with the spirits and with the one Great Spirit.

All visions were sacred to the Indians and all young Indian boys had to go looking for their vision. They firstly went to sweat lodge to purify and clean themselves. Secondly, they would pray whilst fasting (going without any food) until they received their vision, which would be connected to nature. Finally, they would return to the tribe and have their vision interpreted by a Medicine Man and then the youth would receive his adult name, which would be connected to his vision. Young men go up to a hill, cry and pray for some animal or bird to come to them.

For five or six days they neither ate nor drink, and they became thin. While in this state they dream, and whatever animal they see in their dreams becomes their medicine and guardian through life. " (J. G. Frazer, *The Native Races of America*, Lund Humphries 1939). It was different for girls. Indians

believed that women could easily make contact with the spirit world, and they believed they gained this ability when they hit puberty and had their first menstrual cycle.

They would then get special training from the Medicine Man on how to control this link and to prevent the spirits from over powering her and would be given her adult name, which was often celebrated by a feast. Fourthly, the Indians believed that the Medicine Men of their tribe could contact the spirits and use their power. The Medicine Men were men, who had special powers. They were usually men, who had unusual wisdom and very strong personalities. The Medicine Men were essential to the tribe because of his ability to make contact with the spirits of all living things.

Everything he did for the tribe stemmed from this ability - The Indians believed that he could cure sickness because he could use the power of the spirits; they believed he could interpret visions because of his closeness to the spirits and the spirit world. " The Indians knew what herbs to use for medicine, how to prepare them and how to give the medicine. This they have been taught in the beginning, and each generation has men who were skilled in the art of healing, in gathering herbs, in preparing them, and in administering the medicine. " (Referring to the Medicine Men - S. M. Barrett (ed. , Geronimo: His Own Story, Sphere Books 1974.)

Each male Indian had his own medicine, which was kept in a small bag and was hung around his neck at all times. The bag would contain items that were sacred to the particular Indian e. g. a bird's claw, a buffalo's horn. No one would know what the bag contained except him and when he died his

bag would be buried with him. " They were also told in a dream what description of herbs or roots to gather as their medicine, and this they collect and put into a small bag as a charm. They also kill the animal they dreamed of and keep its skin as a charm.

No one knows what is the medicine they have gathered; it is kept as a secret. " (G. Frazer, *The Native Races of America*, Lund Humphries 1939). Girls did not need medicine bags because of their power and ability and closeness to the spirit world, they did not need any further power in order to contact the spirits. The Medicine Man was important to individual Indians and to the whole tribe. Before the tribe's elders and chiefs decided anything important the Medicine Men were consulted and they offered their advice to the rest of the council members.

Finally, at times there was a need for an Indian Tribe as a whole to contact the Spirits (often in times of great trouble), they did this through many ceremonies, rituals and dances. These dances were an important part of religious life and in all of them a Medicine Man would take the lead part. There were dances they performed associated with going to war and the Scalp Dance was performed to celebrate any victories. The most common and important dance amongst the tribes was the Sun Dance, which was more of a ritual than a dance.

In this dance, an Indian tortured himself to show the rest of the tribe his courage and bravery, and bring visions to himself and to the other dancers, who tortured themselves also. Through these visions the dancers hoped to make themselves better warriors and better hunters and therefore bring

glory to the rest of the tribe. The young braves were hauled from the ground facing the sun, by straps attached to wooden skewers which were passed through the flesh on their chests.

This caused excruciating pain during which time the Indians believed that the spirit was freed and worldly things were left behind. Extracts from *The American West*, Susan Willoughby). In some other tribes the young braves suffered further pain by enduring their fingers and toes being cut off. The ritual ended when the Medicine Man decided that it was complete. " The next day the dancing began, and those who were going to take part were ready for they had been fasting and purifying themselves in the sweat lodges, and praying. First, their bodies were painted by the holy men. Then each would cut a place in his back or chest, so that a strip of rawhide, fastened to the top of the tree, could be pushed through the flesh and tied.

Then the man would get up and dance to the drums, leaning on the rawhide strip as long as he could stand the pain or until the flesh tore. " (A Black Elk describing the Sun Dance, in Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*). Sitting Bull had once taken part in one of these ceremonies for four days before he received his great vision of victory against the US army in the Battle of Little Bighorn. ' A painting of the Sun Dance, By George Catlin Indians had Strong beliefs on the land, they loved the land and it was very dear to them. " Our Land here is the dearest thing on earth to us. (White Thunder - a Sioux Indian, in Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Barrie and Jenkins 1971).

The Indians believed they were part of the earth - they came from it and returned to it when they died. They also believed that land belonged to

everyone and so no - one owned it and they believed that some places on earth were sacred. For Example, high places were sacred because they were closer to the spirit world, The Black Hills is one of this scared high places. The Indians never sowed or planted anything in the land because they believed that to do so is like ripping open mother earth's chest.