American Indian Culture
Ohio Mound Builders

Significance: The earliest “architects” in North America built elaborate burial sites.

When a large number of human-made burial mounds were found in the Ohio River drainage and other parts of eastern North America in the nineteenth century, the ancestors of native North Americans seemed an unlikely source for their grandeur, at least to the European mind. Various non-Indian Mound Builders were hypothesized: the lost tribes of Israel, the Vikings, and other Old World groups. This oversight of Native Americans is surprising, given the high culture developed by the Native Americans in Mexico and Peru. In fact, other hypotheses suggested that the Mound Builders were an offshoot of, or ancestral to, these Middle American cultures. Few explanations allowed for a relationship to North American Indians. Late in the nineteenth century, however, careful studies by the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of Ethnology demonstrated that the mounds were built by ancestors of the historic North American tribes.

How did the builders of such elaborate structures, presumably sedentary agriculturalists of high culture, develop? How did they give rise to the more mobile, and seemingly less highly cultured, natives encountered by the pioneers? These questions cannot be answered definitively, but much is known about the Mound Builders, and reasonable hypotheses for their origin and relationship to the historic Indian tribes have been developed.

Most evidence suggests that the original natives of North and South America were members of Siberian tribes that crossed the Bering Strait from Siberia to Alaska some time after fifteen thousand years ago. This was during the early stages of the last glacial retreat, when the Bering Strait was dry land. These tribes were big-game hunters who moved south into North, Central, and South America as the ice sheets melted. These people, called Paleo-Indians, moved into the eastern part of North America and came...
to live in sparse, wide-ranging populations in the forests that developed there after the glacier melted.

Archaeologists recognize a second Native American culture, the Archaic, beginning about eight thousand years ago. Directly descended from Paleo-Indians, the Archaic Indians are thought to have given rise to the Mound Builders around 700 B.C.E. Some late Archaic woodland groups buried their dead in small, natural hills, and a few built small burial mounds, the presumed progenitors of the more elaborate burial mounds built by the Woodland Indians. The larger burial mounds are widespread throughout eastern North America but are centered in the Ohio River drainage.

The earliest of the Ohio River Mound Builders are called Adena Indians and are thought to have lived between 700 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. Their culture is characterized by the development of fiber-tempered pottery, domestication of several kinds of native plants, and the development of elaborate rituals and practices for burying their dead, including the mounds in which they were buried. They also worked stone to make pipes and various ornaments. In addition to cultivating plants, they gathered wild plant products and hunted available animals. They used a spear-throwing device called an “atlatl” (developed by Archaic or late Paleo-Indians) to produce greater flight speed in their spears. They added burials to individual mounds through time, and were more sedentary than their Archaic predecessors. There is evidence that trading networks developed between the Adena people and contemporaneous American Indian cultures.

The Adena gave rise to the Hopewell Indian culture, which was also centered in the valleys of the Ohio River and its tributaries. The Ohio Hopewell culture is recognized from around 100 B.C.E. until about 400 or 500 C.E. The Hopewell tradition is characterized by advanced pottery production and stoneworking, more intensive cultivation of native plants, some cultivation of corn (*Zea mays, ultimately obtained from Mexico), and more elaborate funeral procedures and burial mounds.

Although corn was grown by the Hopewell people, it was not the staple it became in Middle American and Mississippian cul-
tures. Instead, corn seemed to be grown more for symbolic and religious ceremonies. There is some anthropological evidence that the Hopewell people’s more diversified diet, based on the cultivation of several native plant species and supplemented by hunting and gathering, produced a healthier population than did the corn-intensive diet of the Mississippians.

The Hopewell Indians also developed vast, nearly continent-wide, trading networks. This trade may have been associated with another cultural development that differentiates the Hopewell from the Adena. Researchers have hypothesized that some Hopewell men obtained privileged positions in society due to their trading skill and trade contacts. These men were buried with more elaborate material goods and in larger and more complex mounds than were other members of the population. As a result, Hopewell burials suggest a class structure not seen in the more egalitarian Adena burials.

Adena and Hopewell mounds were built by people carrying baskets full of dirt from a source region, called a borrow pit, and depositing the dirt on the growing mound. Large mounds with many burials were built in stages, with one set of burials superposed upon an earlier group. Many artifacts, presumably prized possessions and tools needed for the next life, were buried with the dead. More of these are found in Hopewell burials than in Adena burials. The Hopewell differentiation of class, and contrasting Adena egalitarianism, are hypothesized on the basis of such artifacts and specific conditions of the burials.

Hopewell characteristics are all elaborations of Adena characteristics. It is impossible to determine the point in time at which the Adena culture ended and the Hopewell began; instead, there is a lengthy transition period. Clearly, the Hopewell tradition is a continuation of the Adena culture.

The Hopewell culture peaked in the Ohio River Valley around 200 C.E., and their mound-building activities, at least, disappeared between 400 and 500 C.E. Numerous hypotheses have been proposed for the decline of Hopewellian peoples, at least as Mound Builders. The theories range from an environmental catastrophe,
brought on by larger population concentrations and intensive agriculture, to changes in trade balances that brought an end to the Hopewell people’s strategic central position between the northern and southern and between the eastern and western sources of raw materials and finished goods.

The last North American mound-building culture, the Mississippian, was centered along the Mississippi River, at Cahokia, where East St. Louis, Illinois, now stands. It developed around 700 C.E. and flourished until after 1500. Adena and Hopewell mounds were primarily burial mounds, but many Mississippian mounds were platforms upon which temples, houses, and other structures were built. Many scholars believe that these Mississippian Mound Builders were descendants of the Hopewell, through intermediates who, for unknown reasons, abandoned mound-building activities. Many also believe that the Mississippians were directly ancestral to the Cherokee, Sioux, and other historic American Indian tribes. Some researchers posit that Hopewellians were ancestral to the Iroquois.

The Ohio Mound Builders maintained a developing culture for more than a millennium and played a central role in North American prehistory for much of that time. Their descendants gave rise to the prehistoric Mississippian culture and to historic Indian tribes. In addition, North American archaeology traces its professional roots to the exploration of their mounds.

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Sources for Further Study


their achievements in astronomy, geometry, and measurement.


See also: Culture Areas; Effigy Mounds; Mississippian Culture; Mounds and Moundbuilders; Serpent Mounds.
Okeepa

Tribe affected: Mandan
Significance: The Okeepa was a Mandan summer ceremony conducted to reestablish the tribe’s ties with nature.

The Okeepa was a ceremony conducted by the Mandans, a seminomadic tribe living in the northern Great Plains. It was a ritual held during the summer that was seen as a means to renew the life of the tribe and to reestablish the tribal relationship with nature. The specific purpose of the Okeepa was to appease the spirits of the waters, which Mandan legend claimed had once covered the earth in a flood. Tribal members took part in the ceremony by impersonating certain animal spirits, such as the snake or beaver. Other members were painted to represent day and night.

The main action, however, centered on two young men who dangled in the air, hung by ropes stuck into their flesh with pegs. After a certain period of time they were lowered to the ground. They then had to make their way to a masked warrior, who would proceed to cut off one or two of their fingers.

At the conclusion of this grueling experience, the two men ran a circle around the outside of the medicine lodge. Participants sometimes collapsed and had to be dragged. Any young man whoexcelled in withstanding the ceremony was considered a good candidate for future leadership positions.

Ruffin Stirling

See also: Religion; Sun Dance.
Olmec Civilization

**Significance:** One of the earliest advanced civilizations on the North American continent.

Olmec civilization is considered to be one of the oldest civilizations of native North America. Recognition and identification of Olmec culture are based exclusively on archaeological evidence, since no direct descendants of Olmec civilization have ever been identified. The Olmec heartland included the present Mexican states of Veracruz, Tabasco, and Chiapas, along the southern and western edge of the Gulf of Mexico, but Olmec influence extended across most of southern Mexico and northern Central America. The term “Olmec” is drawn from the Aztec language Nahuatl and loosely translates as “the rubber people,” in reference to the production of rubber in the Olmec heartland.

Evidence of Olmec culture first appears about 1500 B.C.E. in the state of Tabasco. The area consists of flat, swampy coastal floodplains crossed by rivers draining from highland mountains to the south into the Gulf of Mexico to the north. Seasonal flooding and the lush tropical environment permitted the development of agriculture and the exploitation of domesticated plants, particularly corn, which led to the development of sedentary societies and advanced forms of social and political organization.

At sites such as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, the Olmec constructed large earthen platforms more than 3,000 feet long, 1,000 feet wide, and 150 feet high, upon which were erected ritual and ceremonial structures of stone and more perishable materials such as wood or plaster. These platform complexes served several purposes, including residences for elite Olmec families and rulers, gathering places for public ceremonies, and burial sites for Olmec royalty. At the site of La Venta, the Olmec constructed conical pyramids in the center of their platform complexes, perhaps meant to imitate mountains or volcanoes not found in the immediate Olmec area. The earthen platforms consisted of layers of worked colored stone laid out in large plazas and covered with as many as a dozen
sequential layers of sand and earth piled one on top of the other to construct the platforms. The complexity suggests that the process of construction was as important as the final structure.

Platforms were engineered and constructed to control water flow throughout the structure. Elaborate drainage systems, composed of sections of carved stone, channeled water throughout the platforms, diverting it for waste runoff and public hygiene and creating decorative and sacred ponds and streams of fresh water within the platform complexes. The scale and complexity of the earthen platforms, along with the evidence of extensive farming and agriculture, suggest that several thousand people may have used or occupied the sites at one time. At least ten large-scale Olmec sites have been identified in the Olmec heartland. Advanced systems of political organization must have been in place to enable the assembly and management of the workforce necessary to construct such elaborate complexes. It is also significant that the Olmec created their buildings and monuments without the wheel, domesticated animals, or metal tools, none of which was used by any Mesoamerican peoples.

Most information regarding Olmec culture that does not come from their architecture is drawn from their remaining artworks. Although the Olmec probably created a wide variety of art forms, such as paintings and textiles, most of these forms have not survived in the archaeological record. What has survived in great abundance is Olmec stone sculpture, and the remaining carved stone images convey a great deal of information about Olmec beliefs. The Olmec were extremely adept at working very hard types of stone, particularly volcanic basalt and jade, neither of which occurs naturally near the Olmec heartland sites. Large basalt boulders, some more than ten feet tall and weighing several tons, were transported as much as sixty miles from volcanic mountain ranges such as the Tuxtla mountains; sacred green jade was imported from areas of western Mexico or eastern Guatemala and Belize.

The basalt boulders were carved into a variety of shapes, usually human but occasionally representing animals or mythological deities, probably originally intended to be displayed in the open
plazas of the earthen platforms. Many of the large carved boulders were intentionally defaced or broken and buried within the platforms during Olmec times, suggesting that either the Olmec or a foreign people symbolically killed the sculptures before abandoning the sites.

One of the most common types of boulder sculptures is a series of human heads carved in a lifelike, naturalistic style. Although the specific identity of the subjects is not clear, evidence suggests that the heads portray either former Olmec rulers or defeated enemies. Facial features vary noticeably from one head to the next, suggesting individualized depictions, and each wears a distinctively different type of skullcap or helmet. The caps may represent royal headdress or a type of headgear worn by participants in a ball game similar to modern-day soccer. The losers of this game, which was played on stone, I-shaped courts throughout ancient Mesoamerica, were ritually sacrificed, usually by decapitation. Portions of the ball game may have developed in the Olmec heartland, since that is the source of the rubber used for the ball itself. Regardless of the specific identity of the stone heads, the size and degree of naturalism attest the Olmec sculptors’ ability to manipulate large, hard stone for artistic purposes. Smaller stone objects, such as jewelry, ritual implements, and burial offerings, were carved from other hard stones, including jade. The color green was probably considered sacred, and jade was much valued by all pre-Columbian societies. Humans and animals were common subjects, and implements such as ax heads were frequently formed in the shape of humans, suggesting a spiritual tie between the function of the object and its symbolic imagery.

Olmec art reveals much about Olmec political and religious beliefs. Olmec sites were probably governed by elite royal families and kings. Warriors and human prisoners are frequently depicted in Olmec sculpture, suggesting that the Olmec practiced formalized warfare and related forms of human sacrifice. They worshiped a pantheon of natural spirits, chief among which were powerful animals such as the cayman or alligator, the eagle, the shark, and, perhaps most important, the jaguar. The Olmec were
similar to most Native American cultures in that the most important religious figures in Olmec society were the shamans, or curers, who were believed to be able to change into animal forms at will and communicate directly with the supernatural world. Olmec sculpture frequently depicts shamans in the act of such transformations.

Between 1000 and 300 B.C.E., Olmec influence stretched far beyond the Olmec heartland. Carved jade and ceramics in Olmec style have been found in central and far west Mexico, and Olmec-style rock carvings, paintings, and earthen platforms occur in areas south of Mexico City. Large Olmec-style carved boulders and upright stones occur along the southern Pacific coast of Guatemala and El Salvador during this period, and Olmec ceramics are found as far east as eastern Guatemala and Belize. The evidence suggests that the Olmec were interacting with a large number of non-Olmec cultures throughout the area at this time. After 500 B.C.E., early examples of hieroglyphic writing, similar to the later hieroglyphic writing of the Maya, appear in a few isolated examples of Olmec art, but these cases are rare, and Olmec civilization appears to have declined before the writing system was fully exploited.

After 300 B.C.E., Olmec culture disappears from the archaeological record. Several later Mesoamerican cultures, particularly the Maya of Guatemala and the Yucatan peninsula, inherited and continued many aspects of Olmec style and culture, and the Maya, in fact, seem to have considered the Olmec as their divine ancestors.

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Sources for Further Study

Coe, Michael D. America’s First Civilization. New York: American Heritage, 1968. One of the earliest comprehensive treatments of
Olmec art and culture. Coe was the first scholar to interpret Olmec culture as the precursor to later, more widely known Mesoamerican cultures such as the Maya.


See also: Agriculture; Ball Game and Courts; Corn; Culture Areas; Mayan Civilization; Political Organization and Leadership; Religion; Sculpture.
Oral Literatures

Tribes affected: Pantribal
Significance: With no written languages, American Indian peoples transmitted their ideas from one generation to the next through storytelling; the surviving legends link Indian history to the present.

Among peoples who do not have a written language, cultural traditions and philosophies are transmitted orally. In traditional American Indian cultures, senior members of a tribe used storytelling to pass ideas, events, and value systems to the next generation. Oral storytelling differs greatly from written literature because stories are slightly varied with each telling. Storytellers have individual styles and preferences; they can exaggerate some aspects or eliminate ideas altogether. With each generation, stories are altered to fit the present situation.

Geographic Influence. Legends of American Indians relate closely to all elements of the natural environment. Tribes occupied a wide range of geographical landscapes, with some Indians living in desert conditions, others by the sea. Some tribes occupied wooded mountains where rivers and waterfalls were plentiful; others existed on dusty plateaus. In Indian tales, regardless of the environment, all parts of the natural landscape—pebbles, trees, mountains, rivers, shells—pulsate with life. Humans, animals, vegetation, and landforms are all interrelated.

The Supernatural. Indian stories are religious experiences that include taboo, ritual, and magic. Natural elements are often personified during the course of a storyline. Mountains, rocks, and rivers may be given human characteristics and feelings, while humans may be turned into fish, stars, or mountains. Just as quickly, these elements may return to their former states. Some characters are permanently assigned natural forms. For example, troublemakers may become mountain peaks as lessons for future rascals. Legends also set human lovers as stars in the sky, destined to chase
each other for eternity. Indian tales are filled with an interweaving of supernatural and natural elements.

**Story Structure.** There is often a circular element to the progression of Indian legends and stories that is different from the linearity of European storylines. The time progression reflects the Indian belief that all reality is cyclical. The repetitive circular patterns allow listeners to hear subtle variations on themes, which promotes both the remembrance and the understanding of oral legends.

Those accustomed to European storylines have at times criticized Indian legends as chaotic or incomplete. They claim that recognizable beginnings and endings are missing. Indian stories are not intended to be evaluated by Western logic, however; oral stories are often told in chains, with one image or character triggering another story. The chain often reaches back in time. Many tales are not intended to be isolated from previous episodes; instead, these stories are parts of a progression. The knowledge of past legends may be needed to understand a particular story. Moreover, certain words may have meaning only if previous tales have been heard. For example, the word for “sun” may represent the name of a sun god who is present in a whole line of stories. Without knowledge of the full significance of the word “sun,” listeners may misinterpret a particular story. Indian legends are not isolated stories for entertainment but are part of a lifetime collection which educates tribe members about religion, the supernatural, and living in harmony with nature and with other humans.

Many Indian tales center on celestial elements that are used to inspire appropriate behavior and to punish unacceptable actions and attitudes. They also attempt to explain the mysterious nature of the skies.

**Sun and Moon.** The sky held great significance for American Indians. They studied the stars carefully to determine when their crops should be planted and harvested. They followed the sun’s placement in the sky as an indication of the seasons. This fascination with the heavens is reflected in Indian legends. The sun is seen
as the great fertilizing agent of the universe. Although the Juchi, Cherokee, and Inuit regard the sun as female, most tribes give male attributes to the sun. In many tales, the sun makes love to mortal women who then give birth, not only to humans, but to animals. In a Brule Sioux tale, the male sun removes an eye and throws it into the wind, where it becomes the moon woman. The sun directs the moon maiden to walk along a bridge of lightning so that she can roam the earth. Man and woman then come together on Earth and through mutual understanding and caregiving join their bodies to people the earth.

In one Winnebago myth of the sun’s creation, the orb is reduced to a small object that is snared by Little Brother. The reward for his great power in bringing light to his tribe is that humans would thereafter be chiefs over animals. The Inuit tell about a brother raping his sister. After the rape, the sister runs, lighting her way with a torch. Her brother, who carries a torch of his own, follows, but falls in the snow, where his torch turns from flames to embers. A large windstorm lifts the brother and sister into the sky, where he is turned into the moon and she into the sun. They are always far away from each other, with the sun coming out only after the moon is gone. The Cherokee give female qualities to the sun, which is stolen by Grandmother Spider and brought to her people along with fire. The Zuñi tell about Coyote, the trickster, who steals the sun and moon from the kachinas (supernatural intermediaries). Coyote is greedy, wanting the box of light for his own. Because of his curiosity, Coyote disobeys the chief and opens the box to examine the light. The moon and sun escape into the sky, and cold comes to the world.

The Stars. The Plains tribes were primarily nomadic hunters and gatherers; they relied greatly on the stars to indicate direction, time, and the seasons. These Indians considered the celestial bodies supernatural beings and often told stories of various stars taking human form. The Blackfoot explain the origin of the North Star in this way: A young maiden looks longingly at the Morning Star and wishes that she could have that star for her husband. In time,
the Morning Star appears on Earth as a handsome youth who takes the maiden to the house of his parents, Sun and Moon. The maiden is married to Morning Star and lives a life of ease in Sky Country; however, her curiosity and disobedience result in her son being turned into a star. This star, the North Star, never moves and is called the Fixed Star by the Blackfoot and the Star That Does Not Walk Around by the Omaha.

The seven stars of the Pleiades hold great significance for many cultures. This small cluster of stars helps define the calendar and signals coming events. The disappearance of the Pleiades tells the Tapirape Indians that the rainy season will soon end. The Zuñi of New Mexico use the Pleiades to determine when planting should begin. The Cherokee of the Southeast give special significance to the Pleiades because there are seven stars in the group. Seven is a sacred number because it represents seven directions—north, south, east, west, up, down, and center.

Many Indian legends incorporate the Pleiades. The Onondaga of the Northeast tell of seven children who neglect their chores and dance throughout each day. After several warnings from the elders, these children become so lightheaded that they drift into the sky, never to return. The Shasta, from the forested lands of Northern California, tell how the greed and selfishness of Coyote, the trickster, lead him to kill Raccoon. As punishment, the children of Raccoon kill all Coyote’s children, except for Littlest Coyote, who is not selfish. Raccoon’s children and Littlest Coyote run away to Sky Country to be protected from the selfishness of Coyote. They become the Pleiades.

Earth. Many tribes have myths which explain the emergence of the earth. Many explanations describe a watery primordial environment from which mud is brought up to make the earth. Some tribes describe life in the interior of the world. These inhabitants dig their way up from the center of the world until the top layer, earth, is reached. Earth is that environment which is in light. Indians of the Northwest tell of entering a hole in the sky in order to emerge on the earth. From the California region and the Southwest come tales
about the original world parents, Earth and Sky. Many myths have
the creation of Earth eliminating the darkness of the universe.

The Cherokee describe an Earth suspended in delicate balance,
which humans must maintain for survival. The earth floats on wa-
ters and is tied to the ceiling of the sky by four ropes connected to
the sacred four directions. If the ropes break, the world will tum-
ble, carrying all living things to death. The earth will then be like a
submerged island, covered with water. This tale also incorporates
the supernatural, for sorcerers and shamans are called upon to put
the sun higher so that the earth will not be too hot for human sur-
vival.

The Hopi tell a tale about two goddesses who cause the waters
of the world to recede eastward and westward until dry land ap-
ppears. To bring light and warmth to this land, the sun removes his
skin of gray fox and dons a yellow skin to brighten the sky. The two
goddesses then create a little wren out of clay. Animals and hu-
mans are later brought to life, always in pairs. Humans feed
mostly on rabbits and deer, which leads to many quarrels. In frus-
tration, the goddesses leave to live in the middle of the ocean.

Humans. Human creation myths seek to answer mysteries
about the human condition. Humans are generally created from
supernatural beings, from natural elements, or from animals. In
most tales, animals and plants precede the creation of humans.

A number of legends have the first woman of Earth impreg-
nated by a sunbeam, a salmon, or the west wind. For some tribes,
the first human is a child endowed with supernatural powers. The
Sioux tell of Stone Boy, who brings sacred ceremonies and prayers
to his tribe by building the first sweatlodge for purification. The
Brule Sioux, however, say that the first human is an old woman
who has sacred medicinal powers. Many legends have women as
the first humans, for women are associated with fertility, concep-
tion, and pregnancy. In some stories, the first humans are twins,
born of a supernatural god. In others the trickster, Coyote, is given
credit for breathing life into humans. The deceitful side of humans
is the result of having been created by Coyote.
The Modoc tell about Kumush, Old Man of the Ancients. He and his daughter descend into the underground, where spirits gather to sing and dance. Darkness permeates the underworld, and after a week, Kumush longs for light. When he returns to the upper world, he takes some underground spirits with him to people his world. To feed these people, he supplies fish and beasts, roots and berries. He then designates certain roles for the people: “Men shall fish and hunt and fight. Women shall get wood and water, gather berries and dig roots, and cook for their families.”

In human creation myths, the earth and the universe are often seen as neverending circles within which humankind is just another animal. Because all elements of nature are related, animals are often responsible in whole or in part for the creation of humans. In a tale from the White River Sioux, a rabbit comes across a clot of blood and begins to kick it around as if it were a ball. The movement of the clot brings it to life in human form. At times, the processes and rhythms of nature bring life to humans. The Penobscot tell of a young man “born from the foam of the waves, foam quickened by the wind and warmed by the sun.” The same legend tells of a girl born after “a drop of dew fell on a leaf and was warmed by the sun.”

Some stories explain the different races. The Pima tell how Man Maker uses clay to mold human images and then places them in an oven. When he removes the various forms, they have different shapes and colors. He saves the forms that please him best; the others are sent to live in various places across the water. The Modoc explain that Kumush, Old Man of the Ancients, gathers bones in the underworld and selects certain ones to make Indians to reside in particular places. He makes the Shastas brave warriors, the Klamath easily frightened, and the Modoc the bravest of all.

Love. Indian love stories teach responsibility and commitment to loved ones. The characters are often given tests to demonstrate the strength of their commitments. In some tales, battles are fought between two men for the love of a young maiden. These contests
are fought until death, a death in the name of love. Legends of love also weave the natural and supernatural together. In various stories, human lovers are transformed into stars; a whale takes a human wife; a man marries the moon; and a wife follows a butterfly man. These tales also include traditions that had significance in the courting process. The Keres Pueblo tell a story about men and women who try to live apart. The tale illustrates that women depend on men for survival. A legend of unselfishness comes from the Multnomah; it concerns a maiden who shows great love for her people by sacrificing her life to the spirits so that all those suffering from sickness will be cured. She jumps from a cliff as the moon rises over the trees. Today, her spirit, dressed in white, exists in the waters of Multnomah Falls.

Death. American Indians believe that accepting death is an affirmation of life. Crazy Horse claimed that being willing to die was a way of honoring the human spirit. Indian tales reveal not only human death but also the crumbling of cultures and nations. The end, however, makes way for the arrival of the new. The Caddo explain that people must die because the earth is too crowded. To ease the pain of losing loved ones, a medicine man sings songs that call the spirits of the dead to come and reside with those still living. The Haida tell of a great flood which takes the lives of many people. Survivors drift in the waters until they reach mountain peaks sticking out of the ocean. The tribes are dispersed in this way. The Wishram tell of an Indian hunter who kills more elk than is needed for food. In doing so, he also kills his guardian elk. Because his guardian spirit no longer exists, the young brave dies in the Lake of the Lost Spirits. From the Brule Sioux comes another story which teaches that humans must live in balance with nature. In the worlds before this world, people did not know how to act properly, so Creating Power used fire, earthquakes, and floods to destroy the previous worlds. He then remade the world and populated it with people of understanding and speech. He told the people that they must live in harmony with one another and with all living things.
All Indian legends teach the need for balance between living creatures and natural phenomena. When greed and egotism cause humans to treat nature or other people abusively, then the offenders are punished. By weaving natural and supernatural elements into every story, Indians pass on models of behavior that reflect harmony between physical and spiritual realms.

Oral storytelling gives importance to the elders in a tribe, for they are respected for their wisdom. They are the transmitters of traditions and history. Through their art, they preserve culture.

Sources for Further Study
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Kroeber, Theodora. The Inland Whale. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959. This collection of nine California Indian legends is followed by a thorough discussion of each piece. A discussion is also offered about qualities of Indian stories and about the place of oral literature in the study of comparative literature.


See also: Ethnophilosophy and Worldview; Oratory; Religion; Sacred Narratives; Wampum.

Oratory

Tribes affected: Pantribal

Significance: In traditional American Indian cultures, which had no written languages, the ability to speak effectively was a respected trait and a necessary one. Oratorical skill is still highly valued today.

The ability to speak powerfully and persuasively is a talent every culture admires. For Native Americans, oratory is an extremely important element of ceremonial and nonceremonial life. Before the invasion of North America by Europeans, most native peoples had no written language, so human experience was memorized and transmitted orally from one generation to the next. The information handed down included family and tribal histories, mythology, craft techniques, and the content and syntax of rituals and ceremonies. Many tribes honored articulate speakers with leadership, since oratory was seen, along with dreaming, as a spiritual power. Most tribes developed both understandings of what made oratory effective and formal rituals surrounding the practice of it.

Perhaps the most concise division of the types of Native American oratory comes from A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff’s book American Indian Literatures (1990), in which the author suggests that Native American oratory may be ceremonial, nonceremonial, or a mixture of these two. Donald M. Bahr, in Pima and Papago Ritual Oratory (1975), uses a more complex system for categorizing such orations as ritual oratory, preaching, and songs and stories.
Ceremonial or ritual oratory occurs in sacred situations. These addresses may be directed toward the powers of nature or to the tribe itself, and may take the form of prayer or the tale of a hero’s journey. Nonceremonial oratory, or preaching, takes place in public settings, such as at parties, political events, battle sites, and council meetings. In his essay “The Plains Indian as a Public Speaker,” Theodore Balgooyen writes, “Public speaking was associated with nearly every kind of public ceremony and was an important means of settling political and legal questions. Every respected warrior was expected to speak on matters of policy if he had a strong opinion.”

In daily practice, oratory took many forms. In the Southwest, tribal leaders often gave a sermon each morning from the top of a hut or mound. In rituals of mourning and celebration, leaders and warriors were often moved to eloquence as they expressed sorrow, hope, and thanksgiving for all that the Great Spirit had done. The most commonly collected examples of native oratory are speeches given at tribal councils and U.S. government forums in which Native Americans struggled for peace and for their rights. Children and adults learned history and geography from tribal storytellers, as well as tribal values and the original meanings behind customs and ceremonies.

The right to speak publicly, Ruoff notes, was generally restricted to men, but there have been numerous exceptions, including Chief Viola Jimulla (Yavapai), Sarah Winnemucca (Paiute), Celsa Apapas (Cupeño), Warcaziwin (Sioux), and Gertrude S. Bonnin (Sioux name: Zitkala Sa). Over the past several decades, particularly, the status of women as orators has grown significantly.

A variety of techniques can be identified in Native American oratory, whatever its context. One of the most common tropes is repetition. By repeating key words or phrases, the orator is able to emphasize certain themes and is able to make each speech more memorable for his or her listeners. For example, when Creek leader Tecumseh confronted Governor William Henry Harrison about his violation of various agreements, he frequently referred
to Harrison as “brother.” This was ironic, because Tecumseh was notifying Harrison that if he did not make amends with the Indians, they would declare war. By repeatedly calling his potential enemy “brother,” Tecumseh suggested that his people wanted peace and he reinforced the idea that European Americans and Native Americans were equal.

Another technique which Bahr describes is the “there was/he did” technique. This device operates as a form of parallel construction, in which one section—the there was line—"states the existence of a thing," while the following section—the he did line—"tells what was done to it." Using this technique, an orator was able to construct long chains of events, thus forming a logical and descriptive narrative.

Other oratorical techniques used by Native Americans include the careful use of rhythm, metaphor, assonance, and alliteration. These techniques, which can help make speeches more easily understood and remembered, were common among all tribes, and they remain in use by Native American orators today.

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Sources for Further Study

See also: Kinship and Social Organization; Music and Song; Oral Literatures; Political Organization and Leadership; Wampum.