

herds on reservations for the use and welfare of tribal members with a collective number of over 8000 animals. Buffalo meat and hides are available at no cost to tribal members for community events that require communal meals. The ability to serve buffalo at feasts completes cultural practices in ways that serving cow does not. Native American participants believe that the spirit of the buffalo is present at the event and bestows its health and well-being on those who partake of the meal. Participants report they feel better nourished and healthier after eating meals in which buffalo meat is a major part. Tribal artists use buffalo products in their work, which is given to others or sold to generate income. Some members of the Lakota, Crow, and Kiowa and probably others as well visit the herd privately and can be seen in meditative repose, watching them. Buffalo shed their winter coat in the spring and the "shed hair" falls to the ground or is caught in bushes on the grazing lands where it is gathered for use in rituals or domestic purposes. Some use it as padding in their pipe bags or for small pillows. As in the past all parts of the buffalo are used for food, hide and tools.

Environmental degradation on the Plains is commonplace due to overgrazing by cattle and sheep, which are more destructive to the grasses and the land than buffalo unless kept at a proper carrying load per acre. Teachers on the reservation grapple with changes in the landscape by taking school groups to visit the buffalo herd to learn about its traditional cultural and ecological importance. They learn about other animals that used to be common there such as prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, and other grassland native creatures. Many contemporary Plains Indians believe that the restoration of the buffalo will aid in the recovery of the land to its original healthy condition before the advent of Euro-Americans. Indian communities have been impacted by a dramatic increase in diabetes and heart disease due to high-fat diets, overweight and sedentary lifestyles over the last 40 years. As a result a healthy diet has become an important community issue and the buffalo is part of this discussion. Buffalo meat is lower in saturated fat than cattle and is being marketed nationally as a healthier food choice for those who want a low-fat diet but still want to eat meat. Some Indian tribes are raising buffalo in part as a commercial venture and selling to food suppliers who market it nationally. Simultaneously, Indian medical professionals encourage native people to take the same advice and switch to eating buffalo instead of cattle as well as other aspects of the traditional diet. Some Euro-American ranchers are raising buffalo commercially as a substitute for beef in response to new concerns about high-fat diets, and Indian tribes are taking advantage of this new market and selling meat nationally. Some contemporary Native Americans interpret the obvious link between modern diets and lifestyles and resultant disease as another sign of the failure of contemporary life and the superiority of traditional values and lifestyles.

Many communities have established summer culture camps for their youth where they learn about traditional values and ways and are taken to visit the tribal buffalo herd. Where possible the herd is kept in distant pastures with no paved roads, so it takes some effort to reach them and discourages casual visitors. When approaching the herd, prayers are said to honor and appease the animals and to remind humans of their reliance on these animals in the past and the present. While many of these children are from Christian families, the linkage between the natural world and humankind, often expressed in terms of respect, is stressed as the proper way in which to approach all of the landscape and its inhabitants. The inherent sacred nature of the Earth is believed to be manifest in these visits and it is hoped that the children will take this away with them and observe it in the rest of their lives, no matter what religious faith they may observe. Practitioners of traditional Plains religions are usually sanguine about simultaneous participation in Christian faiths although the reverse is not true. Nevertheless, the land-human relationship found in all native religions, and embodied so clearly for Plains people in the buffalo, is intact and being taught in subtle but deliberate ways to future generations of Indian people. In the words of a Lakota song – "Buffalo Nation, the People are depending upon you, so we pray you will be healthy" (www.intertribalbison.org).

JoAllyn Archambault

Further Reading

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- See also: Lakota; Native American Spirituality; Yuchi Culture and the Euchee (Yuchi) Language Project.

Black Elk (1863–1950)

Nicholas Black Elk is the most famous American Indian religious thinker of the twentieth century. He was a member of the Oglala tribe of the Lakotas (popularly known as the Teton or Western Sioux). In his childhood and youth he participated in the traditional buffalo-hunting way of life, then witnessed the wars of the 1860s and 1870s between the Lakotas and the U.S. Army and the destruction of the buffalo herds by the early 1880s. In 1881 he settled on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in southwestern South Dakota.

Outwardly, Black Elk's life differed little from his contemporaries and may serve as representative of the experiences of the first generation of reservation Lakotas.

In other ways, however, Black Elk was exceptional. His life was shaped and guided by powerful and transcendent visions that placed on him a spiritual burden to serve his people as a holy man (called “medicine man” in English) and a healer. He is the only Lakota holy man of his generation to preserve a detailed record of his life and thought. In 1931 he told his life story to John G. Neihardt, who fashioned the material into a book, *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (1932). In 1944 Neihardt interviewed Black Elk again concerning tribal history and traditions, using the material in a historical novel, *When the Tree Flowered* (1951). The full transcripts of both sets of interviews, representing as closely as possible Black Elk’s own words as translated into English, then written down by Neihardt’s daughters, were published as *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (DeMallie 1984). During winter 1947–1948 Black Elk related to Joseph Epes Brown an account of Lakota religious rituals that was published as *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Brown 1953). In short, the documentary record dictated by Black Elk is unparalleled for American Indians, and his teachings, embodied in these books, have come to stand as representative of American Indian spirituality.

Black Elk told Neihardt that at the age of nine he had received a vision from the Thunder-beings, the powers of the West, and was taken to meet the Six Grandfathers, the spiritual embodiments of the powers of the natural universe – the four directions, the sky, and the Earth. The vision embodied a Lakota concept of ecological relatedness, including Earth and sky, land and water, four-leggeds and wingeds, all enclosed in a great circle of life at whose center stood a flowering tree, a symbol of regeneration, at the point where two roads crossed the circle: the red road from south to north representing life and harmony, and the black road from west to east representing warfare and destruction. The vision gave Black Elk the complementary powers of the circle, powers both to heal and to destroy. As a child, he made no use of these powers, but, at the age of seventeen, he felt himself called by the Thunder-beings to enact his vision publicly in order to validate and activate the vision powers. In 1881, while his people were refugees living at the U.S. army post of Fort Keogh, Montana, Black Elk sponsored a Horse Dance, in which riders on variously colored horses dramatized his vision of the Six Grandfathers. That winter Black Elk settled on the Pine Ridge Reservation, the only place where the daybreak star herb that he saw in his vision, a primary source of his healing power, was to be found. The following spring he fasted and sought another vision. Again the Thunder-beings came to him, after which he began his career as a healer.

Changing times led Black Elk to question his religious practices. In 1886, when Buffalo Bill came to the Pine

Ridge to recruit a group of Oglalas for his Wild West Show, Black Elk decided to join in order to learn about Euro-Americans. He was gone for more than three years, traveling first to New York, then to Europe, including England, France, and Italy. During the trip he became a Christian and began to read the Bible as translated into the Dakota language. Far from home, he felt no connection to the spirits that had formerly given him his power and he found value in Christian teachings. But when at last he returned to Pine Ridge in 1889 he learned that some of his people were practicing a new ceremony, the Ghost Dance, which originated with the Paiute prophet Wovoka. The Ghost Dance was a millenarian movement promising that the Lakota dead would return to life, the buffalo would be restored, and the non-Indians would be destroyed. It was the ritual itself that attracted Black Elk to the new religion. The sight of the circle of men and women dancing around a sacred tree seemed to Black Elk the embodiment of the flowering tree of his great vision. He turned back to his vision powers for guidance, finding them once again strong after his return to Lakota country.

The Ghost Dances ended the next year with the unprovoked massacre of two hundred or more Lakota men, women, and children at Wounded Knee Creek by members of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry on 29 December 1890. The Ghost Dance shirts worn by participants failed to deflect the soldiers’ bullets as the ritual leaders had promised. Hope for the millennium ended.

Black Elk continued to perform healing ceremonies using his vision powers. In 1904, however, he put them aside and joined the Roman Catholic Church, in which he was baptized Nicholas. His decision to join the Church was likely pragmatically motivated, since churches provided access to money, goods, and services. At the same time, Black Elk’s earlier experience with Christianity may have led him to choose this as the better path for his family. He served as a catechist and for a time as a missionary to other Indian tribes.

Beginning in 1961 with the paperback reprinting of *Black Elk Speaks*, the book was adopted by the environmental movement as an exemplar of American Indian spiritual and ecological sensitivity. Younger American Indians of many tribes, particularly in urban settings, turned to *Black Elk Speaks* for spiritual guidance, to such an extent that Vine Deloria, Jr., writing a foreword to the 1979 reprint edition, characterized the book as an American Indian bible. Because of the universality of Black Elk’s vision in which he perceived the world as a great circle, and his characterization of the holy as embodying all living things, the vision has spoken to many different audiences.

Black Elk’s teachings have had a profound influence on late twentieth-century thought, particularly at the juncture between environmentalism and spirituality. But they have also engendered controversy, particularly

concerning the relation between Black Elk's characterizations of traditional Lakota beliefs and religious rituals and his acceptance of and participation in Christian religion. Neihardt and Brown made no mention of Black Elk's Catholicism. In publishing the interview transcripts, DeMallie (1984) discussed Black Elk's life as a Catholic catechist, and in telling her life story, Lucy Looks Twice, Black Elk's daughter gave her perspective on her father as a Catholic religious leader (Steltenkamp 1993). A critical literature has developed that attempts to disentangle Christian and traditional elements from Black Elk's religious teachings. However, Black Elk can best be understood as an individual who spent his entire life seeking religious knowledge to benefit his people. As a young man he found it in traditional religion, and later, when he traveled in Europe, he found strength in Christian teachings. After the failure of the Ghost Dance, Black Elk apparently relied more and more on Catholic teachings until he finally stopped the practice of traditional rituals altogether. But this should not be confused with lack of belief. Black Elk's descriptions of Lakota religion incorporated more and more Christian symbols and values as his life progressed, revealing an increasing syncretism of Lakota tradition and Christianity. In old age he performed traditional Lakota religious rituals for the edification of tourists, not merely for amusement, but to demonstrate that there was goodness and value in the old ways, different as they were from Christianity.

Raymond J. DeMallie

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- See also: Lakota; Lakota Sun Dance.

P Black Mesa (New Mexico)

In the autumn of 1969, I spent a month in the Huichol Indian village of San Andres de Coahimiata in a remote region of the Sierra Madre Occidental of western Mexico. I was conducting field recordings of Huichol music and documenting their annual peyote fiesta, as well as their construction of musical instruments. It was during this time that I realized that traditional cultures are endangered by the spread of industrial monocultures whose paradigm is dominated by an economic imperative and growth for its own sake.

On returning to the United States, I resigned as music director for the Center for Arts of Indian America and co-founded the Central Clearing House in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Clearing House was committed to gathering and providing information about threats to the natural environment occurring throughout the American Southwest. In early April 1970, National Park Service historian Bill Brown informed me of a massive coal strip mine to be situated atop Black Mesa, a land formation located in northern Arizona bearing the largest coal deposit in that state. Black Mesa is sacred to both Hopi and Navajo Indians. The ancient Hopi villages are situated on the three southern promontories of Black Mesa, a land form considered to be the body of the female mountain by the Navajos.

Brown and I explored the surface of Black Mesa from both truck and airplane. We learned that the coal from Black Mesa was to be delivered to two electrical generating stations, one to be located on the banks of Lake Powell near Page, Arizona, the other already constructed in Laughlin, Nevada.

Subsequently, I visited my old friend and Hopi elder David Menongye who resided at Hotevilla on Third Mesa. David had heard nothing of this and asked if I would speak before an assembly of Hopi elders, to which I agreed. Sixty-three elders gathered in the Second Mesa village of Shungopovi in mid-April. I presented the few facts that I had at my disposal. The Hopi Tribal Council chaired by Clarence Hamilton, and represented by John Boyden, a Salt Lake City attorney who served as the Hopi Tribe's legal counsel, had signed a lease. It allowed the Peabody Coal Company of East St. Louis to strip-mine Black Mesa. Coal would both be hauled by special railway to the power plant at Page, and be transported by water drawn from wells tapping the ancient Black Mesa aquifer, then pumped through a slurry pipeline for 273 miles to the Mojave power plant in Laughlin.

The coal commanded a very low price, and the Hopis were to be paid \$1.67 an acre foot for some of the purest water in America. Three acre-feet is the equivalent of approximately one million gallons, or a one acre pool three feet deep. This water was to be pumped at the rate of two thousand gallons per minute, twenty-four hours a day.