



# THE SWEAT LODGE: CAN GOD USE IT?

Dot Everett

**N**umerous Native American tribes use a sweat lodge ceremony as a place of prayer, dedication and worship. The Lakota people call it the *inipi* ceremony. As a spiritual tradition, it has been controversial for Europeans for over three centuries. That a counterfeit sweat lodge has been in the news recently is no surprise.

Early explorers were fascinated by the sweat lodge and other Native American practices and traditions. When missionaries arrived, the fascination ended. Early missionaries told Native Americans that all their Native practices were evil and had to be abandoned in order to embrace Christianity. Some

Native groups did this willingly, while others were forced on threat of death to embrace Christianity. The early Native “Christians” went underground with their cultural and spiritual traditions. Outwardly, they practiced what the white people instructed them to do. Inwardly, their old traditions were the only “real” practices worthwhile

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to them. This syncretism has been how many Native groups have survived for hundreds of years.

Early Native people who sincerely embraced Christianity and followed the forms given to them by missionaries were “single or alone” believers.

They could not reach others from their tribe or group because they alienated themselves culturally from their own people. Only as these

individual believers began to band together did a church begin to be formed. But the bridge back to their culture was now made difficult to cross because of their individuality. In many Native cultures, decisions made are group decisions, not single individual decisions. When someone pulls away from the group, he has little or no influence in leading them to the kingdom of God.

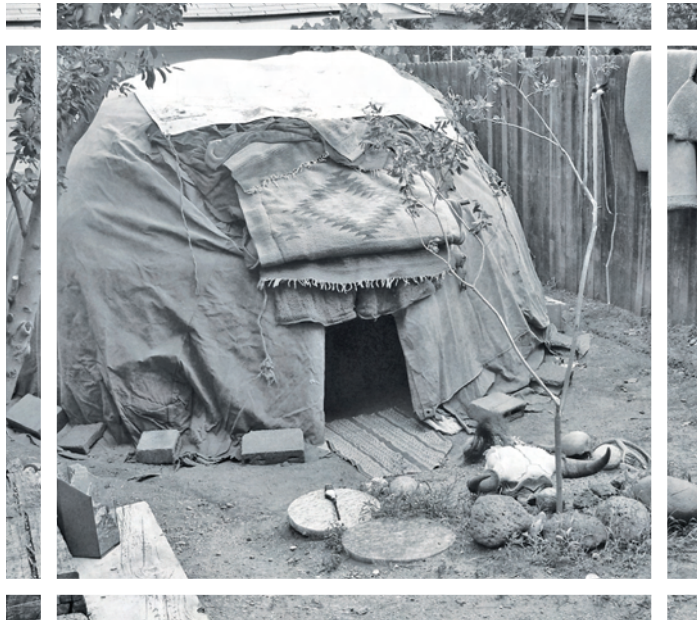
No culture may call another culture evil. Every culture has flaws and problems and certainly is not perfect. For the “superior” weapon-carrying outsiders to impose their culture on Native peoples is not only wrong, it is insulting, degrading, minimizing, insensitive and cruel. The lesson of history is that when cultural outsiders come in and tell a people that everything in their culture is evil, then we are cutting them off from the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform their lives and their culture at His direction. The gospel travels on the road of love and respect, not by coercion

and force. Our job as Christians is to redeem the cultures we enter, taking past forms and practices and applying new meaning to them so that they become a means by which the gospel can be communicated to the unbelievers in a culture. If we want Native peoples to understand, accept and take ownership of the truths of Scripture, then we must respect their culture and not force our way of doing church on them. As long as obedience to the Word of God is the foundation, then we must allow Native peoples and people of all cultures to determine what forms and practices they choose to use in worshipping God and reaching their own people.



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Many of the cultural and spiritual practices of Native peoples were involved with invoking and pleading for help from the spiritual underworld. The same could be said if we go back far enough in our ancient Christian practices: the Christmas tree; the date for Christmas; Easter eggs; hymns that once were drinking tunes. The list is endless. The old children's story of the pot calling the kettle black applies here.



A sweat lodge in Colorado Springs constructed according to traditional Native practices

The sweat lodge is a place of spiritual refuge and mental and physical healing, a place to get answers and guidance by asking Creator God for the needed wisdom and power. The ideal of spiritual cleanliness, emotional growth and healing is central to the ceremony. In Indian country the sweat lodge has shown itself as a way to not only cleanse, but to release anger, guilt and shame in a safe way, and to bring people together as one. A safe place is created where all people feel comfortable. If we participate in ceremony together, we heal together, laugh, live and love together.

In recent years, there has been a strong movement towards contextualization of Christianity within

Native cultures. This is not an effort to continue the practice of syncretism, which simply layers Christian practices on top of old traditional ways. It is an effort for Native people to rethink how their old ways can be given new meaning. The form might remain the same or be similar, but the meaning would reflect deep Christian theology. Included in this contextualization movement is the practice of the sweat lodge.

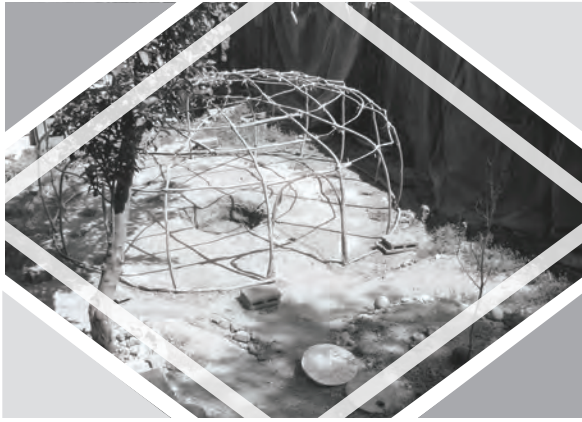
Rituals and traditions vary from region to region and from tribe to tribe. They often include prayers, drumming, and offerings to Creator God. Some common practices and key elements associated with sweat lodges include construction materials, construction practices and protocols. The

most important part of sweat lodge etiquette is respecting the traditions of the lodge leader. There are risks involved, such as wearing metal jewelry, contact lenses and synthetic clothing, which the lodge leader will warn about before entering the lodge. The physical lodge is about five feet high and ten feet in circumference. The frame is usually willow poles, bent and tied together with natural twine. Sheets and blankets are tied to the frame, covering it completely. The final covering is natural tarps, never plastic or synthetic. The lodge must be able to "breathe."

New Age groups or other uninformed, unauthorized groups have made counterfeit lodges (really makeshift saunas), trying to copy the Native American traditions. Since these groups do not have the proper information, people have been hurt or killed. There have been sweat lodge-related deaths resulting from overexposure to heat, dehydration, smoke inhalation, overcrowding or improper lodge construction leading to suffocation. Unlike non-Native groups, Native peoples never charge money, and do not attempt to sell the sacred.

Authentic leaders have earned the right to both construct and lead a sweat lodge walk and teach the values of their culture in being humble, wise, caring and compassionate. Christian practices and wisdom become part of the whole experience.

A Pawnee friend, Myron Old Bear, lives at Medicine Wheel Mesa (which is located within an isolated region of the high desert plateau in western Colorado). He takes traditional Native American ceremonies and slightly changes some of them as needed so that they are based on the universal spiritual truths as found in the Bible. He states that many of his friends have been "burned" by organized religion and want nothing to do with it. However, they are desperately seeking spiritual truth, but not in the Church.



In the center of the sweat lodge is a hole where the hot rocks are placed.

Therefore, we have a great opportunity to share God's Word with those people within the context of Native American ceremonies.

The Purification Ceremonies (sweat lodges) that Myron conducts at Medicine Wheel Mesa are much different from some of the sweat lodge ceremonies that are currently performed, because he bases every ritual within the Purification Ceremony on biblical principles. For example, no amount of "sweating," singing of "Indian songs," or praying "general prayers" will purify our spirits, minds and bodies. The Bible says in 1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Therefore, when people come to Medicine Wheel Mesa to participate in a Purification Ceremony, they are asked to go off alone and ask our Creator to reveal the wrong things they have done that they need to be "purified from" and then during the time they are inside the lodge, they are given time at the beginning of the ceremony to sit quietly in the lodge in the dark and ask our Savior to forgive them of those wrong things they have done, and they make a commitment to avoid making the same mistakes in the future, with our Creator's help.

Myron tells about the ceremonies he conducts on his property in Colorado: "When people come to our Native American ceremonies, I explain to them that there is no power in any ceremony. The ceremony is simply the bringing together of a series of symbolic rituals, and the power is hidden behind the symbol. Therefore, we must know the meaning of the symbol in order to experience the power the symbol represents.

"For example, I explain that when we bring in the first seven stones into the sweat lodge, the first four symbolize our Creator's power that exists in the Four Sacred Directions, the fifth stone symbolizes our Creator, the sixth stone symbolizes Jesus Christ and the seventh stone symbolizes the Holy Spirit. Frank Fools Crow, the powerful Lakota medicine man who

lived on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, and who died in 1989, taught that 'the God of the Indian was the same God the white man served.' He also explained to people that if we were going to follow God we had to become 'hollow bones' like Jesus taught when He said, 'If any man will come after me, let him take up his cross daily and follow me.' The cross was a place of execution. Jesus was teaching us that we must 'die daily to self' if we are going to follow Him. Frank Fools Crow taught about 'becoming a hollow bone.' A hollow bone is dead. It has no life in it. We must die to self if we are going to truly follow Jesus Christ.

"This is what we teach people in the sweat lodge. We explain that this 'dying to self' is the true purpose of the sweat lodge. However, instead of getting out the Bible and reading 'chapter and verse' to the people, we use symbolism to explain the same biblical teachings. People who come to our ceremonies are extremely frustrated with organized Christianity. However, they are desperately seeking spiritual truth. We explain that what they are seeking is in the Bible, but we use 'visual aids' such as sacred ceremonies like the sweat lodge to help them understand those biblical principles. This past summer we have had two women who came to Medicine Wheel Mesa accept Christ as a result of participating in the Purification Ceremonies."



The traditional Native sweat lodge is made of willow branches tied together and covered with natural materials that "breathe."

Myron is a prime example of a wise believer who is contextualizing the gospel for his Native people and showing great love and respect for them and for their culture. Because of his careful biblical teaching through Native symbols and forms, Native people are coming to faith in Jesus through the sweat lodge when no other approach would work. 🌐

*Author's Note: Some ideas are from the Wikipedia article "Sweat Lodge;" the Web site "The Native American Sweat Lodge, A Spiritual Tradition;" and conversation with Myron Old Bear.*