

Same yet Different: The Spiritual Beliefs of the Navajo, Tlingit, and Iroquois Tribes

The Native American tribes of North America are an interesting group of people when it comes to their spiritual beliefs and customs. Common themes throughout the numerous different tribes scattered across the continent include animistic beliefs - such as polytheism and spirits that dwell within the natural world – rituals pertaining to nature and wellness, and beliefs of the creation of the world as well as the tribe's place in it. However, many of the tribes' similarities are on a surface level; closer inspection reveals that each of these tribes holds different views on the world and spirits that dwell within. Three tribes in particular – the Navajo in the Southwest United States, the Tlingit in Alaska, and the Iroquois of the Mid-Atlantic region – perfectly encapsulate the basic similarities but intricate differences seen amongst the Native American tribes' spiritual beliefs. Despite similarities in their spiritual beliefs, the Navajo, Tlingit, and Iroquois all have different pantheons of gods, worldviews, and legends for each tribe's beliefs, all of which can be attributed to factors such as different climate zones the tribes lived in and personal history and developments in the tribes themselves.

The Navajo people of the arid deserts of the Southwestern United States have an interesting and unique twist to the creation myth. Instead of a god or gods creating the world, the Navajo came into the world we know today after travelling through three other worlds: the Black World, the Blue World, and the Yellow World. This world, the Glittering or White World, is where the Navajo called home, for all the other ones were inhospitable in some way. The Navajo people descended from the beings known as First Man and First Woman, who formed from clouds in the First World ("Navajo Legends"). The worlds are most likely the different climate regions the Navajo encountered during a migration from Northern Canada (most likely the Black World because of little sunlight) to the Blue World (possibly Pacific Northwest) to the Yellow

World (possibly Great Plains) and to the Glittering World (arid desert with heat distorting the air and the sand and rocks reflecting sunlight) (Marriott and Rachlin 90). Spiritual beings from the Four Worlds, such as the Locust and Coyote, are revered by the Navajo as the Diyin Diné – the Holy People. Based on this spiritual connection, the Navajo call themselves the Diné, or the People, who are taken care of by the Holy People (“Navajo Religious And Social Views”). As a result, the Navajo see themselves as a chosen people, ones who are superior to other tribes and



cultures as ordained by the spirits. This is most likely a result of the Navajo’s environment; the ability to overcome the harshness of desert life is no small feat, so being able to survive such an inhospitable environment must mean divine intervention or blessings of some kind. Animal spirits existed in each of the Four Worlds, and they ranged from mountain lions to wolves, from locusts to hawks, from coyotes to buzzards, all creatures found within the American Southwest. A principal deity for the Navajo is the Spider Mother (depicted in the statue in the adjacent picture), who is said to dwell within a large rock structure within the Navajo’s homeland, Canyon de Chelly. Spider Mother has many roles in Navajo myth, such as teaching the Navajo how to weave and farm, advising Navajo heroes, saving a young boy from an enemy tribesman, and restoring balance and peace to the world (“Legendary Native American Figures: Spider Woman (Na'ashjii Asdz)”). Numerous species of spiders call the American Southwest home, such as the Southern House Spider or the Spotted Orbweaver (“Arizona Spiders”). Both of the aforementioned spiders may have been commonly seen among Navajo settlements considering how both can be found weaving their webs inside

buildings, most likely explaining how the Navajo “learned” weaving from the Spider Mother. Capturing pests and overpowering potentially deadly animals – such as scorpions or small snakes – could also explain the “mother” aspect to the spider deity. The Navajo has had little outside influence on their own culture. Early on, however, is when they most likely had the most, considering how similar spiritual concepts are seen amongst the Navajo and surrounding tribes, such as the Pueblo or the Hopi, who not only inhabit Arizona, but also have a Spider Mother-esque figure in their pantheon of gods (Native American Spider Mythology). When it comes to Western influence, however, the Navajo were affected barely if not at all. The people resisted American attempts at internment and, although they eventually relocated, still survived and resisted any amount of influence through sheer grit and determination (Marriott and Rachlin 91). This was no doubt born from their beliefs that they were the chosen people and their hearty nature thanks to their environment. Overall, the Navajo’s gods and worldview stemmed from a harsh reality in a rather inhospitable place, much different from a place like the Pacific Northwest.

The Tlingit tribe lived on the numerous small islands that dot the southern coast of Alaska, which the tribe called home for centuries. It can also be seen in their legends that, for countless generations of Tlingit, these islands were all they knew. In the Tlingit creation myth, Raven, the Tlingit’s creator god, spread grains of sand throughout and endless ocean, and where those grains fell, islands of variable sizes appeared. Animals such as the Seal and the Frog, who would become the Keeper of Earth’s Treasures, were also present in the legend. The myth also states that the Tlingit are the children of Raven and a mermaid, potentially showing that the Tlingit believe they have some connection to the water. Considering the islands they inhabit and their dependency on the ocean and rivers for food and transportation, it is possible their mermaid

ancestry shows this connection. The Tlingits also created beautifully carved canoes, usually sporting “tribal insignia” (Kaiper and Kaiper 34) on the prow, with “many men in the village... involved in the total building of a canoe” (Kaiper and Kaiper 34), further showing the sea’s



importance to the Tlingit. Raven himself is greatly revered in Tlingit culture, not just for his creation of the Earth and fathering humanity, but for also giving the Tlingit fire. Why Raven is revered over all other animals could be attributed to the raven’s unique intelligence when compared to other animals.

Ravens are capable of using sticks as primitive tools to gather food, and also manipulate other animals into helping them. Ravens’ ability to not just make their distinctive *caw* sound but also mimic other noises and make roughly “more than 30 distinct vocalizations” (“Common Raven”) could have been seen as a connection or inheritance from Raven himself. Outside of Raven, other animals are revered in Tlingit culture, such as the Killer Whale, Frog, Seal, and Sea Lion.



The numerous amounts of sea life present in their animism again shows the importance of the sea to the Tlingit. The Tlingit showed respect to these spirits in their totem poles, large wooden statues used to tell stories through icons, show debts, and mark burial sites. Tlingit animism remained the tribe’s

primary religion up until the emergence of Russian missionaries to the region. Russian

Orthodoxy was initially resisted, but would later on become accepted by the Tlingit once the shamanistic medicine men failed to eradicate small pox. The missions also forbade the construction of the Tlingit's totem poles, which were seen as idol worship. As a result, traditional Tlingit religion declined, nearly going extinct in the region.

The Iroquois peoples are not an ethnically uniform tribe like the Navajo or Tlingit. They are instead a group comprised of numerous tribes. Formally known as the Iroquois Confederacy, the Iroquois nation was founded and headed by three culturally and ethnically similar tribes: the



Mohawk, the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Oneida, and the Onondaga, all of whom shaped the collective's spiritual beliefs. Despite the myriad deities present in Iroquois culture, the Iroquois believed in a creator

god called Agreskoue, or simply called the "Creator God." Agreskoue was also seen as a god of war; Iroquois Natives would shout his name "before the Battle, and in the Height of the Engagement" (Wolf, 29). This was most likely done as a way to achieve his blessing in battle and to also dedicate the battle and the coming victory to him and his honor, so that he might bless the Iroquois with further fortune. The Iroquois also had rituals and dances for the Creator as a way to give thanks, as seen in the adjacent picture. Other venerated gods in Iroquois culture include Heno, the "lovable old man... god of storms, sender of the beneficent rain, solicitous caretaker of plants and terrible scourge of evildoers" (Wolf, 29), and Gaoh, the "kindly and powerful but touchy Spirit of Winds... whose moods were mirrored in the blasts of hurricanes and zephyrs of springtime" (Wolf, 29). Some lesser gods of the Iroquois included the

Thunderers, servants of Heno who helped him smite out evil, and the Four Winds (one for each cardinal direction) who helped Gaoh. An important note of these gods is how each one is respected in Iroquois culture and also pertains to storms or the sky in some way. This is most likely due to the temperate climate of the northern mid-Atlantic region, which is subject to rainstorms during the beginning of spring. The Iroquois were also based primarily in northern New York and present-day Ontario, close to Lake Erie and Lake Ontario; the immense size of these lakes was most likely responsible for massive thunderstorms that spread across Iroquois land during early spring. One custom of the Iroquois states that no crops should be planted until the first spring thunder is heard (Marriott and Rachlin 34). This shows that these thunderstorms did indeed have an impact on the Iroquois and was used as a definite indicator of when to begin farming for the year. Iroquois culture also focused on good versus evil stories. Before the Confederacy's creation (until the 1500s), the five tribes fought primarily against one another ("The Iroquois Tribes"), which is potentially why this polarized belief came to be such a large part of their beliefs. Serpent gods were considered to be evil spirits always at odds with the Thunderers, who were considered the serpents' sworn enemies. Chances are these evil spirits were born from the venomous snakes that live in the Iroquois' region, which includes the Copperhead, Massasauga, and the Timber Rattlesnake ("Snakes of New York"). Water snakes and large Black Rat snakes also live in the region ("Snakes of New York"); while not dangerous to humans, the size of the latter and habitat of the former could have led to certain early Iroquois fear them, or consider them unnatural. The way snakes appear, move, and consume prey could also have added to their fearsome charm. As time went on, the Iroquois' religion began to become less animistic and more Christian. French Jesuits and English missionaries infiltrated and converted most of the Mohawk tribe to Christianity, which soon became their primary

religion (with some Iroquois religion still sprinkled throughout) (“Mohawk”). Considering the common belief in one creator god and denominations between good and evil, it is most likely that conversion was not forced upon the Iroquois but rather accepted and explored.

By exploring the individual gods, legends, and beliefs of the Navajo, Tlingit, and Iroquois Native American tribes, we can begin to see that the similarities are more subtle than they might appear. We begin to see that the environment each tribe was born in shaped the native culture, gave each a different reason to respect one animal or concept over another. We begin to see that the Native Americans were much more different from each other than initially expected, that while all these tribes may feel ethnically similar, each is its own culture and beliefs. These same differences show that each man, woman, and child who calls themselves Navajo, Tlingit, or Iroquois is indeed Navajo, Tlingit, or Iroquois.

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