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The Sanctity of Sacrifice:
An Exploration of Value Judgments Placed Upon Sacred Land, Objects, People, and Events Through Native American Culture

The crucifix is perhaps the most sacred symbol of Christians, symbolizing the sacrifice of Christ to forgive man of all sin. In Japan, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial stands unrepaired with human shadows still burned into the ground, as a commemoration of all who sacrificed their lives during the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Today, closer to home, Americans argue as to whether we should rebuild the Twin Towers or let the area stand as a monument to the undisputedly heroic people who died entering the building to save their fellow man. N. Scott Momaday, in his collected body of essays titled The Man Made of Words, wrote that "acts of sacrifice make sacred the earth" (114). His words ring true, as the commemorations of sacrifice cited above are clearly powerful in their emotional and spiritual significance. Exactly what is it about the nature of sacrifice that makes it so universally respected across all cultures?

Momaday, however, continues to write that the sacred is "recognized and acknowledged in the heart and soul," even going on to express that those who seek to study and define it are essentially setting out to do the impossible (114). It might be impossible to try and put our fingers precisely on what is sacred and reverent, but through

a detailed look at the role of the sacred and sacrifice in one specific culture, interesting similarities can found among others, thereby allowing for an expanded world view and awareness of such an important and driving aspect of our spirituality. The indigenous cultures of North America are an excellent area of study to this end; few cultures have their views on the sacred so carefully articulated. The Native American culture is still alive, and few can claim to understand sacrifice as well as they.

Traditionally, Native American people did not differentiate between man and animal consciousness. Enrique Salmon's article "Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship" discusses several indigenous stories of historical origin; several tribes believed that they had come from plants, while Salmon quotes Coulander in that the Hopi "owe their emergence into this world to a spider, a spruce tree, a pine, and a stalk of bamboo" (1331). The concept of humanity emerging from nature (very different from Judeo-Christian concepts of separation from nature) created a sense of unity with the world among the Native American cultures. Further, there was not just a sense of equality; there was a sense of interdependence. Leslie Marmon Silko cites a creation story of the ancient Pueblo people in Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit, where man could not fit through the entrance to the fifth world without antelope and badger to widen the hole. "Not until they could find a viable relationship to the terrain--the physical landscape they found themselves in--could they *emerge*" (Silko, 38). They recognized that man was no more or less important than the other parts of nature, and it was this view that brought them to honor the spirits of the animal. In "Traditional Ecological Knowledge: the Third Alternative", Raymond Pierotti and Daniel Wildcat expand upon the idea, noting that if an animal was caught it was "assumed to

involve some element of choice on their part" (1337). Leslie Marmon Silko similarly states in Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit that "all phases of the hunt are conducted with love: the love the hunter and the people have for the Antelope People, and the love of the antelope who agree to give up their meat and blood so that human beings will not starve" (26). The belief that animals had *chosen* as brothers to die for the hunter enabled the Native American people to view relationships between predator and prey as sacred, and this is where Native American culture is largely misunderstood by western society. If sacrifice is universally understood, could a better understanding of it have prevented so many tragedies between the Native American and the European settlers?

Momaday, once again in the Man Made of Words, writes about his experiences with Kiowa culture, maintaining that "Sacred ground is in some way earned" (114). He expresses the sacred is earned through offerings and sacrifice, "--song and ceremony, joy and sorrow, the dedication of the mind and heart" (114). From this point of view he describes the Sun Dance.

> The was from the beginning the thread of life; it was food and shelter, god and beast. The head of a buffalo bull, uppermost on the Tai-me tree . . . was a symbol of life itself. And nothing could have been more perfectly symbolic. The Kiowas could have conceived of no greater sacrifice. (66)

Momaday describes the offerings and sacrifices the dancers made: dancing to the edge of exhaustion, ritually scarring themselves with images of the sun and moon. He explains that the actions of everybody in the Sun Dance were total and deliberate, and ends the passage with a note that the Sun Dance was "as old as the need of man to know his god."

Only after we understand the true Kiowa relationship with the buffalo can we understand that acknowledging its sacrifice was to acknowledge the Native American's place inside all of creation. They were all fellows, and they all danced a circle of life, death, sacrifice and giving. Through the Sun Dance, the sacred nature of these sacrifices was realized, and in Momaday's own words, "it enabled them for a moment to partake of divinity, to send their voices--however frail--against the silence at the edge of the world" (65). Through sacrifice the Kiowa were able to feel and know that they were somehow part of a greater and sacred whole.

It is so important for people to connect with their heritage, because culture provides so many ways to understand the holy and spiritual. The Kiowa (and many other Native tribes) were prevented from performing their religious rituals, and this prohibition made them feel removed from the larger world. Momaday described the event as sacrilege, "the theft of the sacred" (76). The wholesale slaughter of the buffalo, a sacred animal, created a people who felt lost; Momaday described them as having "broken spirits" (66). While unfortunate, this phenomena allows us to view how the roles of sacrifice and the sacred play out from another angle. As humans we need to ascertain their place in the cosmos; through sacrifice, we are able to do so. If the meaning of sacrifice is taken away, we have nothing. The Plains Oral tradition defines the term "thrown away" as to be "negated, excluded, and eliminated" (Momaday 103). Experiencing loss is frequently painful, and all that can sustain a person through it is the meaning of his or her loss. This meaning is the fine line that separates what is sacrificed and what is "thrown away" or simply destroyed. It is extremely misfortunate when a person can not see and feel the sacred that is part of sacrifice, due to the meaning of the

sacrifice being taken away through sacrilege.

My most sincere goal through looking at these facets of the sacred in Native American culture is that we might all reach a heightened perspective about the role of the sacred and sacrifice in our own cultures. Through read the works of Momaday, Silko, Salmon, and many others, I've become much more aware as to my own connections with sacrifice, and the many meanings of loss and offerings. Through sacrifice and this alone, be it purely dedication of the mind and heart as Momaday suggested, we can reach into something much alrger than ourselves. We can feel the presence of God if we only sacrifice the time to discover that we are all connected to the infinite. The meanings of Sacrifice show us the links.