

Sacrifice and the Preservation of the Environment in Native American Belief

by James Larking

Where a people's vision speaks of life, sacrificial means for recurrent renewal of all life, and suffering for the identity with the source of life, such vision can neither be destroyed, denied or ignored.¹

The Native Americans practised sacrifice in many forms, from the simple giving of oneself, spiritually, in the Lakota Vision Quest, to the bloody slaughter of thousands by the Aztec. A Sacred path, or a corruption of truth, the sacrifice has always existed among the tribes of the Americas. These traditional religions required of their adherents both sacrifice and death. The two aspects are intricately intertwined. The theme of sacrifice and death is the giving up of yourself, whether in an outward or inward sense.

All these holy peoples and holy things are now hearing what I say! O Wakan-Tanka, I shall offer up my body and soul that my people may live!²

The outward is the ritual performed, the surrender of earthly goods or of life itself, for the renewal of that life. The inward is the capitulation of the ego, the death of the lower self to attain the higher. Rather than a loss, as it would appear to be, the sacrificant gains all. That which is ephemeral is abandoned and the imperishable is all that remains.

¹ Brown, Joseph Epes, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1982. p. 101.

² *The Gift of the Sacred Pipe*, Vera Louise Drysdale (ed), University of Oklahoma Press, USA, 1995. p.55.

Truly, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are all for Allah, the Cherisher of the Worlds.³

Sacrifice and death, then, are positive affirmations of the truth of existence; that we must lose in order to gain. That these rituals can become corrupted is sadly evident yet the underlying truth of their efficacy is unimpeachable.



Abraham's Sacrifice.

The conception of contemporary humanity, generally speaking, is that to gain requires one to take. There is little concept of the idea that life on earth is a gift and that we should acknowledge our existence as such, that we owe thanks to the source of all life. This is the sacrificial attitude that is distinctly lacking in the framework of modernity. The acknowledgement of our dependability on that which gave us birth is the key to a successful existence. With this inner sacrifice, access to the divine storehouse is available. Denial of this truth closes the door of the storehouse, and the benefits are therefore few.

For pleased with thy sacrifice, the gods will grant to thee the joy of all thy desires. Only a thief would enjoy their gifts and not offer them in sacrifice.⁴

³ *Qur'an*, VI:162

⁴ *Bhagavadgita*, 3:12

It is believed by the Native Americans of the Lakota tribe that if the affirmation of sacrifice is not made then the, "...very energy of the world...will run out."⁵ The sacrificial rites of the Sweat Lodge, the Sun Dance and the Crying for a Vision are all a giving of oneself to renew creation.

O Grandfather Wakan-Tanka, bend down and look upon me as I raise my hand to You. You have beheld this sacred centre which we have fixed, where we shall suffer. I offer all this suffering to You on behalf of the people. It is Your Light which comes with the dawn of the day, and which passes through the heavens. Be merciful to us, O Great Spirit, that the people may live.⁶

The first tribes received Gifts from their Creator and these rites were part of their obligation to revere all life, as well as a way of returning thanks. The earth was these peoples Mother and she cared for them and sustained them. They, in turn, cared for her.

Behold this pipe which we—with the Earth, the four Powers, and with all things—have offered to You. We know that we are related and are one with all things of the heavens and the earth. We all wish to live and increase in a holy manner.⁷

Such attitudes and rites were not confined to the Lakota but were almost universal throughout the Americas. The Queche Maya knew that sacrifice was essential to the life of the land. This is evidenced in their sacred book, "The Popul Vuh." Hun-Hunahpu and Vucub-Hunahpu were sacrificed by Hun-Came and Vucub-Came. The head of Hun-Hunahpu was placed in a tree that had never before borne fruit and the tree instantly produced fruit.⁸ The Hunahpu brothers had undergone purificatory trials before they were sacrificed so that their offering was acceptable and caused a renewal of the essence of life. This fruit, miraculously born, in turn gives rise to the birth of the Mayan people,⁹ thus life is given by sacrifice from the Gods so that the people must give sacrifice in acknowledgement of the gift of creation.

The Tupi tribes of Brazil practiced ritual sacrifice and cannibalism

⁵ Ibid. Brown. p. 101.

⁶ Ibid. *The Gift of the Sacred Pipe*. p.62.

⁷ Ibid. *The Gift of the Sacred Pipe*. p.67.

⁸ *Popul Vuh*, Goetz, Delia and Morely, Sylvanus G, (Eng. Trans.), from the translation of Adrian Recinos (Spanish), University of Oklahoma Press, USA, 1950. pp. 117, 118.

⁹ Ibid. p. 119.

which, despite its apparent savagery, ensured the survival of these prolific peoples. Not much is known of the beliefs of the Tupi due to their near extinction after the Portuguese colonisation, but it can be assumed that their belief was similar to that of other indigenous groups of the Americas. There was much ritual involved in the killing of the sacrificial victim. This included the fact that the executioner did not eat of the victim but retired to his hammock to recover from the event. This suggests a strong aspect of the sacredness of the occasion.¹⁰ The club used for the execution is decorated and displayed to the victim, again indicative of the sacredness of the offering.¹¹ Although unrecorded, there is a sense of renewal in these sacrificial rites.

Far north of the Tupi, the Eskimo have a myth which tells of Sedna, a goddess, who cut off her fingers to give birth to seals, whales and other marine life.¹² A sacrifice is the origin and renewal of life in almost all of these tribal groups. Therefore the people give back in acknowledgement of that which they have been granted. That these beliefs were universal in the Americas preserved the purity of the environment, for the tribes respected the earth. They were aware that the earth, their Mother, sustained them and that they should not abuse her. Native Americans did not take the fertility of the earth for granted. Creation was not an object to be used or cast aside but a living being who nourished them. Even the sacrificial excesses of the Aztec Empire were committed in the belief that the fertility of the earth would be renewed.

It is unnecessary to dwell on the present condition of the environment in modern day America, which is an abysmal mess. It is necessary, however, to emphasise that this condition has been arrived at through the neglect of the above principles. Modern society manipulates and exploits the earth without thought of returning any gratitude for what has been offered. For the sake of transient material benefit mankind rapes Mother Earth. Regarding her as an inanimate object, modern man consumes the very core of her being. Yet, despite a refusal on the part of humanity to do so, the sacrifice must and will be paid.

...where the sacred in the world and life is held as irrelevant illusion, where evasion

¹⁰ Hemming, John, *Red Gold, The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians*, MacMillan London Ltd, London, 1978. p. 33.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 32.

¹² Carneiro, Robert L, *Origin Myths*, <http://www.scicom.lth.se/fmet/myths.html>

of sacrifice in pursuit of some seeming “good life” becomes a goal unto itself, then in the empty and concomitant ugliness of such a life and human-manipulated world, the ordering cycle of sacrifice will and must be accomplished by nature herself so that again there may be renewal in the world.¹³

‘Natural disasters’ are, in reality, Mother Nature in the process of re-establishing the equilibrium. Scientists can tell us how such things occur in a material sense, but they will not even attempt to explain *why* such things occur. Such basic principles as balance being required in our dealings with nature, seem to have been lost or are just ignored. The modern spirit is in disharmony with the world for it fails to envision its origins. The Native American stepped lightly on the earth for he trod on sacred ground. “My relatives, Wakan-Tanka has been kind to us and has placed us upon a sacred Earth; upon Her we are now sitting.”¹⁴ He dealt gently with nature for she is alive. She was a gift from the Great Mysterious, the Creator, and was revered as such. All of creation was sacred and it was a great crime to harm it.

For religious man, nature is never only “natural”; it is always fraught with a religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness.¹⁵

American Indians were always aware of their sacred origins. They lived daily in the presence of the sacred. There existed nothing that was not sacred. Black Elk of the Lakota Nation speaks of what is in the world,

The Six Grandfathers have placed in this world many things, all of which should be happy. Every little thing is sent for something, and in that thing there should be happiness and the power to make happy. Like the grasses showing tender faces to each other, thus we should do, for this was the wish of the Grandfathers of the world.¹⁶

All of the things of the world are related to each other and in this sense rely upon each other for their continued wellbeing. If one of the links in this sacred chain of existence should neglect or abuse its position then the consequences affect all of life. Scientific modern

¹³ Op. Cit. Brown. p.101.

¹⁴ Ibid. *The Gift of the Sacred Pipe*. p.55.

¹⁵ Eliade, Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt Brace and Company, San Diego, 1987. p. 116.

¹⁶ Black Elk, Nicholas, *Black Elk Speaks*, University of Nebraska Press, United States of America, 2000. p. 149.

man has done this and the results are disastrous. The breakdown of the very fabric of life is proceeding at an alarming rate, despite the efforts of some who are aware of the need for a change in our behaviour. The main problem with attempting to repair the damage lies in the ideology of modernity and its creator, scientism. The ancient peoples of the Americas had no need to repair their world as they never destroyed it. However, it is only in the context of their wisdom that the answer to the modern ecological crisis lies.

European colonists are the major cause, if not the only cause, of the crisis of the environment in the Americas. Upon their incursion into the pristine world of the Native Americans, they immediately began to exploit the land and its resources. With no connection to the earth in their new environs, such as the local tribes had and still have, they saw only the riches to be gained and not the damage done. A sense of the sacred was as foreign to them as they themselves were to the natives. Even though the colonists have now occupied the land for many centuries, there is no sense of the sacredness of the earth except where influence is had from the original inhabitants. And it is in this area that the solutions lie. The problem is; how do you generate a sense of this sacred earth to those who have not had it? We cannot return to the times past and live as the early tribes did; our world has changed far too much for this. But it is essential that we find in ourselves a sense of the sacred and recognise that our earth is sacred and treat it as such. This wisdom can only come from living traditions such as still exist among the Indians. Such traditions as Christianity must be revitalised by the living spirit of these ancient ways.

There is an awareness of the crisis that the modern world faces and attempts are made constantly to repair or at least limit the damage. The dilemma with most of the solutions to the environmental crisis is that they are engaging with the very ideology that caused the problem in the first place. One does not put out fire with fire, one must use water and it is only with the pure water of the sacred that this particular fire can be quenched. To revere the earth as a gift from our Creator is to begin to see how we may start to turn towards a future; a future which, at the present time, does not exist.

Environmentalists talk of sustainability, but such a thing is unobtainable in a mass consumerist society. So long as we demand supermarkets

filled to the brim with multiple product brands, luxury goods such as cars and televisions, use energy such as fossil fuels at an astonishing rate and continue to live in our cancerous-like cities, our earth will continue to be doomed. Not only must we find the sacred, we must dramatically change our way of life. A sense of the sacred would quite naturally change the perspective of society in that it would no longer feel that it could exploit the earth with impunity. There would be awareness that there is a need for care to be taken in our dealings with the world. Sustainability is only possible in the realm of the sacred. To continue to live the way we do and expect our earth to sustain us is a foolish outlook.

Black Elk had the answer to these problems and he spoke of how our understanding and actions should be,

We should understand well that all things are the work of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things; the trees, the rivers, the grasses, the mountains, and all the four legged animals, and all the winged peoples; and even more important, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples. When we do understand all this deeply in our hearts, then we will fear, and love, and know the Great Spirit, and then we will be and act and live as He intends.¹⁷

It is only transformation from within that can have a transforming effect on the exterior world, both of man and his environment. To know who we are and where we come from, in an inward and spiritual sense, are keys to successful living. It is only in modern times that people have asked for the 'meaning of life'. Countless spiritually minded cultures and societies have lived with secure knowledge of these facts about our origins. Black Elk may have doubted himself at times but he never doubted to whom he owed his existence, to whom he owed his service.

The Sun, the Light of the world,
I hear Him coming.
I see His face as He comes,
He makes the beings on earth happy,
And they rejoice.
O Wakan-Tanka, I offer to You this world of Light.¹⁸

¹⁷ Brown, Joseph, Epes, *The Sacred Pipe*, University of Oklahoma Press, USA, 1989. p. XX.

¹⁸ Ibid. *The Gift of the Sacred Pipe*. p. 55.