

# **Freemasonry and Native American Traditions**

**W. Bro. Dennis V. Chornenky**  
**President, Masonic Restoration Foundation**

2004 Annual California Masonic Symposium  
San Diego, CA

There have been many legends and myths regarding Native American traditions and their similarity to Freemasonry. Since the North American tribes did not employ writing systems to document the precise manner and meaning of their rites, and much of the Western interpretation of Native American traditions has been of a poorly informed nature for most of the last two-hundred years, many fantastic and dubious claims and assertions have been made regarding the “Freemasonry of the Indian.”

In light of current scholarship, not to mention common sense, it is obviously absurd to claim that Native Americans practiced Freemasonry prior to the advent of European settlers. However, if seriously examined, there emerge many notable parallels and similarities between Western initiatic rites and symbols and those of the Native Americans. In exploring these similarities, this essay will first address some related academic and historical questions, then it will discuss known Native American rites and spiritual traditions, and prior to concluding, will provide a comparison between a fascinating Native American astronomical device and a certain Masonic symbol.

To this day, relatively little solid academic work has been done on the subject of Native American rites and initiatic practices and their relationship to those of the West. One simple reason for this is that Native American initiatic traditions are fundamentally essential, that is, they are most concerned with that which is of the spirit, or essence, rather than what can be written down, measured or analyzed. This fact in itself is enough to discourage most modern scholars, who rarely venture into that dreadful frontier of oral tradition and human experience.

It should be understood that tradition is transmission. It is the handing down of knowledge. It is that which has kept its original character and retains its transcendent aspect. Tradition, understood in this way, is the transmission of spiritual influence inherent in any given rite or set of rites. A profane person who knew all the rites of a tradition by reading about them in a book, would still not be initiated in any way, for the spiritual influences attached to the rites would in no way have been transmitted to him.

Consequently, an initiatic tradition is ungraspable by the profane world, as it leaves no trace accessible to the investigations of ordinary historians, whose main method is to rely on written documents, which in the case of any authentic initiatic tradition are practically nonexistent. Hence the problems in trying to find the origins of Masonry and Native American ritual practices.

The lack of written documentation, while perfectly natural for an initiatic organization or traditional society, unfortunately often leads to wild and highly misleading speculations. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, for example, the Bureau of Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution, an authority on American Indians, in its first annual report<sup>1</sup> quoted a paper on native burials written by Dr. J. Mason Spainhour of North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> The Institute described him as a man of “undoubted integrity, whose facts as given [could] not be doubted.” Dr. Spainhour’s paper was based on the interior of a mound that he had dug into in Burke county, North Carolina. He claimed to have found there three bodies, each in an upright position. One was in the south facing north, one in the west facing east, and one in the east facing west. Dr. Spainhour concluded his study as follows:

The facts set forth will doubtless convince every Mason who will carefully read the account of this remarkable burial that the American Indians were in possession of at least some of the mysteries of our order, and that it was evidently the grave of Masons, and the three highest officers in a Masonic lodge. The grave was situated due east and west; an altar was erected in the center; the south, west, and east were occupied, the north was not; implements of authority were near each body. The difference in the quality of the beads, the tomahawks in one, two, and three pieces, and the difference in distance that the bodies were placed from the surface, indicate beyond doubt that these three persons had been buried by Masons, and those, too, that understood what they were doing. Will some learned Mason unravel this mystery, and inform the Masonic world how they obtained so much Masonic information?

Explanations for this supposed Masonic knowledge among the Native Americans ranged from speculations regarding the lost tribes of Israel, visits by the Phoenicians and even ancient immigration by the Welsh. In 1956, for example, the *California Freemason* magazine reproduced the following passage from the *Oregon Freemason*:

Here’s a new slant on how American Indians may have actually had what was the forerunner of Freemasonry as we have it today. To accept this theory it is necessary to set aside the discovery of America by Columbus, and possibly even the claim that Leif Ericson came here looking for Minnesota ahead of all the others. Now comes the story that ancient Welsh bards have records of a Prince Madoc who was presumed to have been lost at sea in 1172. Five hundred years later a report came from America of two or three Indian tribes which spoke the Welsh tongue. About 1909 two Welsh miners, looking for gold in Arizona, came across an Indian tribe rehearsing a Masonic ceremony in Welsh. The supposition is that Prince Madoc reached the Americas and taught the Welsh tongue and Welsh Freemasonry to the natives.<sup>3</sup>

Luckily, the academic caliber of the *California Freemason* magazine has improved substantially since 1956.

In an article appearing in the *Builder* magazine in 1920,<sup>4</sup> Bro. Arthur C. Parker, Secretary of the New York State Indian Commission, described the existence of a “Grand Medicine Lodge” of the Iroquois, which at that time, according to him, still had several chapters among the Senecas and Onondagas. Parker notes that Samuel Cole, in a work entitled “The Freemason’s Library,” and published in Baltimore in 1826, makes references to certain notable ceremonies of the Iroquois and their similarity to Freemasonry. Parker then explains that he feels free to write about this group of Native





known as the *Midewiwin*, had four degrees, which met as separate lodges, into which one could be successively initiated by meeting certain qualifications and contributing a greater and greater amount of property on the feasts associated with the rites. Those inducted were said to receive spiritual insight and the power to cure disease, and received instruction regarding the medicinal qualities of numerous plants.

Initiation into the various societies usually required, and still requires, participation in secret rites, where the candidate often takes on the role of a mythical or historical character, answers questions, makes affirmations and performs certain symbolic acts. Some rites enact a symbolic recreation of the universe or founding of the society as a means of demonstrating and affirming cosmic balance and teaching the initiate to live in harmony with natural forces and his community. In this sense, a central purpose of most rites was also the cementing of brotherhood.



In some societies membership was based on the kind of vision that one may have experienced during an individual vision quest, commonly undertaken at young age as a rite of passage. In all Native American ceremonies, the humble respect for and welcoming of the sacred divine was a necessity for the rites to have any value or meaning. Yellowtail, of the northern warrior Absaroke tribes, wrote the following regarding rites and vision quests:



When a person is on a vision quest, he must have certain attitudes and intentions for his prayers to be sincere, and then he must carry these over into his daily life. It is easy to forget what you learned during this trial; unless you remember to carry on your prayer continually during every day of your life, you will not have learned one of the most important purposes of the vision quest. Each time we talk about one of our sacred rites, you will hear me talk about the spiritual attitudes which a person must possess as that person participates in any rite. It is possible to learn the outer steps that must be accomplished in a rite without learning the inner meanings that are the keys to the sacred traditions. Each seeker must therefore open his heart to the Great Mystery as he tries to follow the sacred way, because the perfect accomplishment of the outer steps of a rite will be worth nothing without the knowledge of the inner meanings.



Bro. Jim Tresner of Oklahoma makes an important comparison between the role of the Medicine Man in Native American society and that of the Senior Deacon in Freemasonry.<sup>9</sup> Tresner explains that a Medicine Man is not an intermediary between others and the divine, but rather, his authority derives from his “own mystic spiritual experience.”

The medicine referred to is the process of spiritual awakening that may be necessary to cure mental or physical disease, gain wisdom strength or spiritual insight, and acceptance of divine cosmic unity. In this way, the Medicine Man, having himself already walked the path, serves as a guide to his community, those preparing for the vision quest and those about to be initiated into the tribe’s mysteries.

In ancient Graeco-Roman mystery schools, a similar function in providing guidance to initiates was fulfilled by the *Psychopompos*, or “conductor of the soul.” The *Psychopompos*

would usually meet the candidate at the entrance to the temple or cave where the rites would be performed and guide him through as needed. This title originated in mythology with an epithet for Hermes in his position as conductor of deceased souls to Hades. In Freemasonry the role of the Medicine Man or *Psychopompos* is fulfilled by the Senior Deacon.

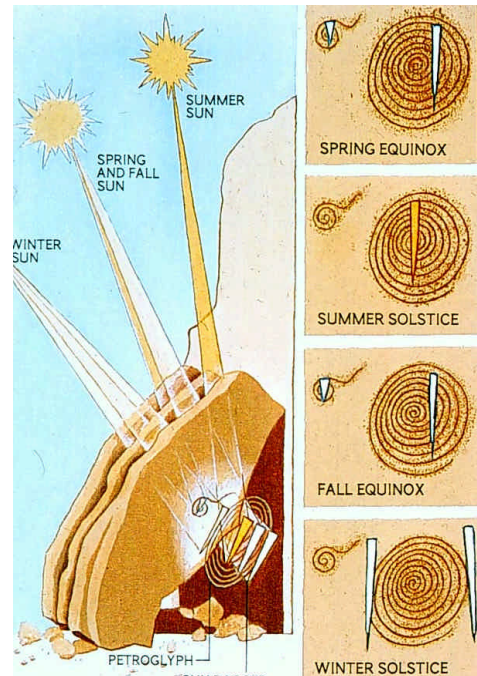
Among many Native American tribes the bat serves as a symbol for the Medicine Man because it is symbolic of rebirth. The bat lives in a cave, representative of the womb, and sleeps upside down, in a position reflective of the child just prior to birth. In this sense, the role of the Medicine Man is more particularly viewed as guide in the initiate’s spiritual rebirth, his emergence from darkness into light. In the Fellowcraft Degree, the Senior Deacon leads the candidate up the winding staircase, showing him firsthand the path by which the lower passions are transcended. Once the candidate has symbolically mastered his intellectual faculties, represented by the seven liberal arts and sciences, he arrives at the middle-chamber of the temple, finally prepared to move from the outer to the inner, from the circumference to his own inner spiritual center, his heart.

Pertaining to the theme of center and circumference, there is a highly sophisticated calendar device of the Anasazi, ancestors of the Pueblo Indians of today, that bears a strikingly close resemblance to a certain Masonic symbol. The Sun Dagger calendar is close to one thousand years old and was first systematically studied by Anna Sofaer in 1977. It allowed the Anasazi to observe the harvesting and planting seasons and easily record time’s passage. It likely served other more spiritual functions as well.

At the winter solstice, rays of sunlight coming between the 3 huge stone slabs, bracket the spiral petroglyph. At the summer solstice, a single band of light bisects the center of the spiral. The spring and fall equinoxes are marked by a separate ray of light that falls on the smaller petroglyph, to the left of the larger one.

Beside the solar uses, the calendar also marked the extreme northern rising positions of the moon at major and minor standstills and indicated a sophisticated knowledge of the overall moon cycle.

The number of grooves in the spiral (counting horizontally from the left edge to the right edge) may record the length of the [moon] cycle. This appears in two possible ways: (1) as the cycle moves from minor to major standstill over 9 to 10 years, the extreme position of the lunar shadow shifts over the 10 grooves on the left side of the spiral; (2) the length of the full cycle (18.6 years) may be recorded by the count of 19 grooves across the full spiral. The number of grooves may also record a knowledge of the 19-year Metonic cycle. In addition the passage of the shadow edge through the far right groove of the spiral may record the midpoint of the declination cycles of the sun and moon.<sup>10</sup>



In the South Carolina Monitor, Ahiman Rezon, a certain Masonic symbol is explained in the following way:

The symbol is ... a beautiful but somewhat abstruse allusion to the old sun-worship. The *two parallel lines*, which in the modern lectures are said to represent St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, really allude to particular periods in the sun's annual course. At two particular points in this course the sun is found on the zodiacal signs Cancer and Capricorn, which are distinguished as the summer and winter solstice. When the sun is in these points, it has reached respectively its greatest northern and southern limit. These points, if we suppose the circle to represent the sun's annual course, will be indicated by the point where the parallel lines touch the circle. The days when the sun reaches these points are the 21st of June and the 22d of December, and this will account for their subsequent application to the two Saints John, whose anniversaries the Church has placed near those days.

One wonders if the origins of our own Masonic symbol are actually to be found with a similar astronomical device in the West, of which no historical record has survived.



To conclude, the similarities between Freemasonry and Native American traditions and the comfortable initiation of many famous Native Americans and tribal chiefs into the Masonic order over the last two hundred years is a testament to the traditional character of Freemasonry. Native American culture as a whole is traditional because all rites are viewed as a natural aspect of a divinely maintained communal existence, and not somehow separate as religion is often viewed in the modern secular world.

Freemasonry bears a certain affinity to this understanding because it is one of the last remaining institutions of the Western world to preserve and practice traditional forms. All traditional societies and institutions are founded on a common human spirituality that seeks to return man to the center of his spiritual existence. The purpose of initiation is to move man from the circumference to the center, from the outer to the inner, in order to fulfill the function of 'unmoved mover' in relation to the world that is his. For the man able to achieve this, it can be said that he no longer belongs to this world, but on the contrary, it belongs to him. Black Elk, a Medicine Man of the Sioux, wrote the following:



I am blind and do not see the things of this world; but when the Light comes from Above, it enlightens my heart and I can see, for the Eye of my heart sees everything. The heart is a sanctuary at the center of which there is a little space, wherein the Great Spirit dwells, and this is the Eye. This is the Eye of the Great Spirit by which He sees all things and through which we see Him. If the heart is not pure, the Great Spirit cannot be seen, and if you should die in this ignorance, your soul cannot return immediately to the Great Spirit, but it must be purified by wandering about in the world. In order to know the center of the heart where the Great Spirit dwells you must be pure and good, and live in the manner that the Great Spirit has taught us. The man who is thus pure contains the Universe in the pocket of his heart.

## **Bibliography**

*First Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, DC, 1881)

Yarrow, C. H., *Introduction to the Study of Mortuary Customs Among the North American Indians* (1880)

Guénon, René, *Perspectives on Initiation* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001)

Denslow, William R., *Freemasonry and the American Indian* (1956)

*The Builder Magazine* (National Masonic Research Society, 1915-1930)

*California Freemason Magazine* (Most Worshipful Grand Lodge California F&AM, 1956)

Hall, Manly Palmer, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (Philosophical Research Society, 2000)

Hultkrantz, ? ke, *Native Religions of North America* (HarperCollins, 1987)

Deloria, Silko and Tinker, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Fulcrum, 2003)

Carmody and Carmody, *Native American Religions* (Paulist, 1993)

Eliade, Mircea, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (Spring Publications, 1995)

Meyer, Marvin W., *The Ancient Mysteries* (HarperCollins, 1987)

Masonic Service Association of North America and the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Oklahoma, *A Shared Spirit: Freemasonry and the Native American Tradition* (2001)

Walker, Deward E., ed, *Witchcraft and Sorcery of the Native American Peoples* (University of Idaho, 1989)

Gill, Sam D., *Native American Religions* (Wadsworth, 1982)

Sofaer, Zinser and Siclair, "A Unique Solar Marking Construct" in *Science*, Volume 206, Number 4416, pp. 283-291 (October 1979)

Sofaer, Anna and Sinclair, Rolf M., "Astronomical Markings at Three Sites on Fajada Butteand" in *Anthropological Papers*, No. 2, edited by Calrson, John B., and Judge, James W., (University of New Mexico, 1983)

Sofaer, Anna, "Lunar Markings on Fajada Butte, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico" in *Archaeoastronomy in the New World*, edited by Aveni, A.F., (Cambridge University, 1982)

Black Elk and Neihardt, John Gneisenau, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (University of Nebraska, 2000)

---

<sup>1</sup> First Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC, 1881)

<sup>2</sup> Yarrow, C. H., Introduction to the Study of Mortuary Customs Among the North American Indians (1880)

<sup>3</sup> *California Freemason Magazine* (Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of California F&AM, 1956)

<sup>4</sup> *The Builder Magazine*, Volume VI, No. 11 (National Masonic Research Society, November 1920)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume X, No. 6 (June 1924)

<sup>6</sup> Deloria, Silko and Tinker, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Fulcrum, 2003)

<sup>7</sup> Hultkrantz, ? ke, *Native Religions of North America* (HarperCollins, 1987)

<sup>8</sup> Further investigations into the origins of this legend are called for.

<sup>9</sup> Masonic Service Association of North America and the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Oklahoma, *A Shared Spirit: Freemasonry and the Native American Tradition* (2001) p. 23-26

<sup>10</sup> Sofaer, Anna, "Lunar Markings on Fajada Butte, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico" in *Archaeoastronomy in the New World*, edited by Aveni, A.F., (Cambridge University, 1982)