Mother Earth Spirituality

• Historical Influences: Pre-contact Spiritualities

• Approx. 70% of North America’s native population dies as a result of contact – disease, slaughter, loss of livelihoods = starvation, etc.
  – leads to loss of spiritual traditions (elderly die in greater numbers, spiritual traditions not passed down)

• Determined Christianization efforts eradicates more native traditions

• Generally speaking, the further west native peoples lived, the more intact elements of their spiritual traditions survived (because contact came later).
Pre-Contact Spiritualities

Many different Native spiritual traditions; two main types:

**Hunting pattern**
- Traceable to Asian origins
- 60,000-30,000 years ago
- Animal ceremonials, vision quests, male supreme being, annual ceremony of cosmic rejuvenation, shamanism, afterlife beyond horizon or sky

**Agricultural pattern**
- 7,000-1,500 years ago
- Rain and fertility ceremonies, priestly ritual, belief in many gods/goddesses, yearly or seasonal festivals, medicine societies, afterlife under earth, or in clouds
Revitalization Movements

• Ghost Dance Movements 1870, 1890
• Smoholla – Dreamer Religion
  – Dangers of European ways, particularly alcohol
  – End of world, followed by new world where dead would live again
• Wovoka
  – Dreamer religion influence – same elements
  – In new world, Europeans would be gone
  – Dance in trance to see spirits of dead
• Sioux tribes
  – Adopted Wovoka’s ghost dance
  – More militaristic flavour
  – Ghost shirts would be impervious to Calvary bullets
  – Massacre at Wounded Knee, Dec. 29, 1890
Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show

- Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show
  - Founded in 1882
  - traveling circus, rodeo
  - Sitting Bull, Annie Oakley
  - Sioux Indians
    - war paint
    - feathered “bonnets”
    - Peace pipe
    - Buffalo hunters

- Creates uniform image of “Indian” in non-native minds

- Unites natives of many tribes by giving a sense of unity, common experiences
Romanticization of the Indian

- Euro-Americans have always seen natives as opposite to own perceived shortcomings, so:
  - Missionaries saw natives as “innocent” vs. “corrupt” European settlers
  - Settlers saw natives as “savages” vs themselves as “civilized”
- 19th Century image of native shifts from “savage” to “noble savage” – naturally spiritual, naturally ecological
- Letter of Chief Seattle
- New Age image = native as spiritual, ecological

“Lone Brave” Poster
Black Elk

- Nicholas Black Elk
- **Black Elk Speaks** by John Neihardt (1932)
- **The Sacred Pipe** by Joseph Epes Brown (1953)
- Search for the historical Black Elk?
  - Catholic conversion 1904
  - Books present him as traditional Sioux holy man

Nicholas Black Elk
Age nine, collapses into coma for 12 days; has a vision. In the vision:

- He meets with six powers, who tell him his task is to make his vision come true
- They gift him with power to give life, bring death, to heal, bring peace, to found a new nation, to cleanse, to influence the earth
- He then has a vision within a vision, in which he ends drought, heals the sick, and plants a “tree” that will shelter people of all races under its branches.
- He then foresees two generations of peace, followed by a new period of violence and troubles; he intercedes to bring healing and understanding, and issues in a new age of peace.
Black Elk’s Rituals

- Peace Pipe
- Keeping of the Soul (Spirit Releasing Ceremony)
- Sweat lodge
- Vision quest
- Sun Dance
- A Girl’s Coming of Age
- The Making of Relatives
- The Throwing of the Ball

- Most of these have been incorporated into New Age Mother Earth Spirituality
- Black Elk stressed the Peace Pipe and the Sun Dance as the most important
- Recounted in The Sacred Pipe

A Girl’s coming of Age ceremony
• New Age Worldview adds two elements:
• Animism:
  – Animal spirits
  – Totem animals
  – Power animals:
    • Bear: strength, resourcefulness, protection
    • Owl: perception, wisdom, instinct
    • Wolf: sensitivity, guidance, truth
    • Eagle: intuition, inspiration, achievement
• Nature-based
  – Mother Earth spirituality theology = reverence for Earth as Mother
  – Social activism:
    • Anti-pollution; pro-native issues such as protection of burial sites, sacred sites, etc., anti-war
Mother earth spirituality is based on premise that First Nations spiritual teachings can help the entire world find an ecologically sustainable, peaceful global society...
Varieties

- Three Main Types:
  - Tribal Reconstructionist
    - Native peoples attempt to reconstruct & revive own tribe’s spiritual traditions
    - Added elements include concern for environmental & social justice issues
  - Pan-Indian Spirituality
    - Native people’s adoption of generic “Sioux” inspired spirituality to replace lost traditions
    - Political component – American Indian Movement (AIM) uses Mother Earth spirituality to foster two goals: 1) develop sense of pan-Indian identity that transcends tribal lines; 2) distinguish lands, rights, religion of native peoples from non-Native – “whites” excluded from rituals
  - New Age Mother Earth Spirituality
    - Native & Non-Native people’s attempt to practise spirituality inspired by Native (primarily Sioux) traditions
    - Appropriate for any person drawn to earth-based, environmentally sound, healing-oriented spiritual tradition
Primal Shamanism

- 4th “type” of Mother Earth Spirituality
- Draws on world’s shamanic traditions (not just Native American)
- Foundation for Shamanic Studies (1983)
- Does NOT stress reverence for Mother Earth, but does provide training in shamanism for many non-Natives who DO practice Mother Earth spirituality

Michael Harner
Bear Tribe Medicine Society

- Sun Bear (Vincent La Duke) born 1929 (Ojibwa)
- Sun Bear’s Vision (age 4): bear surrounded by globes of many colours, who touches his hand
- Sun Bear’s interpretation of Vision: called to unite peoples of all colours in spiritual goal to heal earth.
- Bear Tribe Medicine Society founded in 1966
- Society now headquartered in Klamath Falls, Oregon: holds yearly cycle of festivals & training program in shamanic techniques.

Sun Bear & successor Dixie Wind Daughter
Rituals: Medicine Wheel

• Key proponent = Bear Tribe Medicine Society
• Weekend long ritual
  – Participants “smudged” (sage, sweetgrass)
  – Build circle of 36 stones, representing sacred places in the universe
  – In centre of circle, buffalo or other animal skull placed, symbolic of Creator & centre of universe
  – Participants make “tobacco ties” & place them in circle with prayers for healing the earth
    • Ties made in one of four cardinal colours (west/black; north/white; east/red; south/yellow)
• Other events at Bear Tribe Medicine Wheel weekends: sweat lodges, healing sessions, classes on shamanism, herbal ore, etc.
• Key topic: Earth Changes
  – Earth has been poisoned, she is attempting to cleanse herself of the poisoning
  – This will lead to weather changes, earthquakes, etc.
  – Medicine wheel will help earth cleanse herself by representing image of perfectly aligned universe
Rituals: Peace Pipe Ceremony

• Based on Sioux legend of Buffalo Calf Woman giving Pipe to Sioux people
• Pipe filled with tobacco or red willow bark
• Pipe offered to east in honour of new beginnings, south for growth & healing, west for darkness & release, north for courage, strength, truth
• Pipe also offered to Earth, to thank for bounty, & sky, to thank Father Sky (Wakan Tanka – Great Spirit, Great Mystery)
• Pipe then lit, passed from person to person. Smoke held in mouth, not inhaled
• Smoke represents truthful worlds, truthful actions, truthful spirit
• Peace pipe ritual precedes other rituals of Mother Earth Spirituality Movement
Rituals: Sweat Lodge Ceremony

• Key proponent = Wallace Black Elk (Lakota Sioux)
• Purification (& healing) ceremony
• Often precedes other rituals (such as Vision Quest or Sun Dance)
• 8ft x 12ft approx. lodge built of bent saplings, covered with blankets or branches
• Pit dug in centre, to hold heated rocks
• Water is poured over rocks, to produce steam, which purifies participants
The Four Endurances

- Four cycles of sweat lodge ceremony:
  - Participants enter lodge, meditate & pray
  - Heated rocks brought in: glow of rocks = only light in lodge
  - Water poured to create steam, & leader offers prayers offered for peace, knowledge, wisdom, healing
  - 3 more dippers of water poured, followed by drumming & singing & prayer to Wakan Tanka
  - Participants then focus on/pray for goal of each endurance: first for contact with spirit world, second for courage, third for wisdom, fourth for healing.
  - Brief opening of door flap to let cool air in, then closed
  - Cycle repeats 3 more times
Rituals: Sun Dance

- On first day:
  - Cottonwood tree is cut, after asking permission & explaining why necessary.
  - Tree placed in dance circle with peace pipe; coloured banners (4 cardinal colours, plus blue for sky, green for earth) are tied to tree.
  - Twelve branches tied to tree.
  - Participants undergo sweat lodge ceremony.
- Days two & three:
  - Begin with sweat lodge ceremonies.
  - Ritual clothing, red paint, sage wreaths around wrists, ankles, head.
  - Dancers follow Sun Dance leader in dancing around pole from dawn to sun set, blowing whistles

Key proponent = Ed McGaa (Eagle Man) (Oglala Sioux)
- Primarily confined to native participants
- Four day long ritual
Sun Dance: Day Four

- **Day four:**
  - Same as days 2&3, but on this day male dancers have the flesh of their chests pierced and are attached to ropes tied to pole
  - Symbolic of union with sky, earth – willingness to give all to heal earth
  - Women do not have chests pierced – already sacrifice via pain in childbirth
  - Final dance steps: dance in towards tree, & out again four times. On fourth time, lean back & tear skewer from flesh – breaking umbilical ties to earth.
Other Rituals

• Vision quest – private ritual, 24-48 hours, fasting, search for vision

• Giveaway Blanket – give a gift to the blanket, take one away (mirrors Native practice of redistribution of goods – wealth is shared)

• Making of Relatives – blood brother/sister ritual – spirits of four directions called to witness exchange of blood (today, sometimes other symbolic binding is used – bound hands, or joint sacrifice of cherished objects given to charity)