

Transcript Summary

UAF Oral History Call No: 2024-07-01

Date of Recording: Spring 1977

Length of Recording: 01:03:39

Narrator: Lary Schafer, professor at UAF

Interviewer: N/A

Others Present: N/A

Recording Location: Not given

Transcriber: Angela Schmidt

Transcription Date: May 29, 2024

Keywords:

Native American religions, ceremonies, supernatural, sacred, symbols, values, magic, myths, social structure, dances, roles.

(SIDE A)

(00:00:00)

(blank or silent)

(00:00:35)

Music with flutes and strings; vocal lyrics about people having made the colors change. (Song is "Color Nature Gone" by XIT from their 1973 album "Silent Warrior").

(00:03:25)

Instructor Lary Schafer says this is Tape 1, Humanities 294 Native American Religion. He talks about himself as an instructor. He's been in Alaska for 15 years. He got an undergraduate degree in Sociology and Anthropology from the University of Alaska, then spent a couple years in Japan for undergraduate work. He got his graduate degree in Japanese Studies in Arizona. Then he returned to Alaska and worked for the university and for AFN for a year or so in Fairbanks and the Northwest area. He earned another graduate degree in Indian education.

(00:04:55)

(Recording becomes muffled which continues through 14:14). Schafer says Native American Religion is not taught in too many places. He is not an expert in Native American religion but is highly interested in the subject and has some experience with it. He was born and raised in Montana and worked on a Blackfoot reservation. When he was young he came to Kake, Alaska, and lived there for many years and was adopted by a Tlingit family. He notes that many of the things he is going to say are his own thoughts

and feelings. Students should feel free to take issue or argue with his statements. He has ideas that he would like students to think about.

(00:07:24)

On the first tape Schafer says he will talk about Indian Religion as a phenomena and will also get into sociology and anthropology. He will talk about how to approach materials that the class will be looking at and will do so more specifically on the next tape when talking about assignments.

(00:08:10)

Schafer goes through the course outline. He says that the course purpose is to introduce students to a wide variety of Native American religions. Information will come from Underhill's book (more info below). Students should think about how religion is an integral part of Native American culture, both traditionally and in a contemporary sense. Religion encompasses a way of looking at the supernatural and the world. The course will examine the contrast between Native American and white man's religion, and differences in how they view the world.

(00:09:30)

Students should have three books: "Red Man's Religion" by Ruth Underhill, an anthropologist. Schafer says that Underhill is well thought of by anthropologists and the Native American community, and that she was a very empathetic woman. "Black Elk Speaks," is an autobiography of a Sioux holy man. Schafer says it is an excellent book. "God is Red" by Vine Deloria is a very sarcastic and radical reading. Schafer says Deloria may be difficult reading, especially for freshmen and sophomores, but enjoyable. Students should also have one article called "Religion and Human Life" by Robert Loy[?], an anthropologist who worked with American Indians for many years. Loy[?] was a disbeliever in religion and its function, but later took a look at the role religion plays in society and especially Native American societies.

(00:12:10)

Schafer notes there will be three assignments. The first assignment is five things he would like the students to respond to. He will discuss on the second tape some of these issues. A lot of the reading for the course is easy and good and enjoyable. The first assignment is due February 28. He will deal with specific assignments as they go through the course.

(00:13:22)

Schafer talks about the nature of Indian religion. By Indian religion, he means Native American religions, including religions of Indian, Eskimo and Aleut peoples in the United States and Canada. Schafer says that American Indians have been greatly stereotyped over the years by movies, television, and anthropologists. They have been judged by a standard of how they were a hundred years ago. This is how many Native American people are judged today and were judged ten to fifteen years ago, he says.

(00:14:14)

(Recording becomes clear again). Schafer says Native American people were stereotyped as simple, primitive, outdoors, and as "the noble savage," in a Rousseauian type of classification. People have raised issues with these classifications, however. Schafer continues: Paul Radin wrote a book, "Primitive Man as Philosopher." Radin began to show that the philosophical and religious thought of Native Americans was extremely sophisticated and complex, and could not be classified as simple or primitive thought. Claude Lévi-Strauss has gone into the problem of mythology and thinking processes of traditional people, and has volumes of works on primitive religion, mythology and traditional thought. There is work that shows

traditional peoples' religions cannot be classified as primitive or unsophisticated; in fact, they are just as sophisticated or more so than contemporary Western religions.

(00:16:12)

Schafer says that Underhill talks about how there are many different types of religions, from a few simple ceremonies to things like the Catholic Church and Vatican ceremonies and the whole spectrum in between. Even within the Catholic Church there is variation. Despite the differences, Underhill argues that basically these religions have common elements. Schafer says it's important to run through these to give some understanding of Native American religion. Religions all have "wonder-working" objects - some fetish or amulet that can work wonders. There's some power imbued in the object. There's a relationship to animal and plant life among Native American religions - this is an apology to the animal and plant world for taking their lives. Native Americans understand that it's a gift and they have to behave properly. Underhill has a chapter about fear of women among Native American people. And of course, fear of death as the great unknown. Death breaks up families and social structures and is the biggest disruptive phenomena in any society. And then there are specialists that deal with the supernatural. We have ours, the Sioux have theirs, the Tlingit have theirs, and the Hopi have theirs. These are people who have special knowledge and gifts. If time allows, Schafer says he will talk about affinities that Native American religions have with other religions around the world, specifically Japanese religion and their relationship to Nature.

(00:20:10)

Schafer addresses the question about how religions originated. Anthropologically speaking, there are two great arguments on the issue. Bronislaw Malinowski, a famous British anthropologist, says that traditional people and even modern people have a body of empirical knowledge on controlling Nature to a certain limit, by adding fertilizer and water and so forth. They apply this knowledge to get crops and fish. But they can't ensure absolute success in these tasks - there's no certainty. This gives rise to anxieties and worries that lead to magical and religious rites to ensure success. To ensure success, an individual goes to the supernatural and performs certain ceremonies to guarantee that the rains will come. Malinowski says that individual anxiety is what led to the rise of religion. There is a difference between magic and religion. A magical ceremony has a definite purpose and you don't have to be a specialist to practice magic. Good luck charms tend to be magical in nature. Most people know about these acts - most people can tell you what wearing a rabbit's foot does. Malinowski says that religious rites are different - they're not clear or definite and they're related to myths. For instance, going to church where various rites take place that are not clear.

(00:24:40)

Schafer says that the other idea about the origin of religion comes from Radcliffe-Brown, another British Anthropologist. He says it is not individuals who have anxiety, but there are certain occasions when a group expects a man will be anxious. So the group expects a man to perform a ceremony to alleviate the situation. Malinowski says the individual occasionally feels anxiety and performs a ceremony, while Radcliffe-Brown says society expects the individual to feel anxiety and carry out a ceremony. These are two sides of the same coin. Society is made up of individuals. Functions of religion are related to the internal constitution of society. Religion helps keep society together and gives members of society confidence to deal with everyday life. It strengthens the group as a whole. There is a direct connection between social organization and the nature of the supernatural. People have a reason to keep a moral order and behave themselves, because if they behave right then the gods would behave right.

(00:28:28)

Schafer says the components of a religious system are beliefs, practices and institutions which men have developed. Men developed these beliefs, practices, institutions, churches and clergy to deal with things they can't handle in everyday life. The five major components of religious systems are 1) The set of beliefs related to the supernatural and sacred; 2) Systems of symbols which have the quality of sacredness; 3) Defined activities which have to be performed in relation to beliefs; 4) A group that adheres to the values and ways of behaving; and 5) the sense that man's relation to supernatural world is related to his moral values, which makes man behave.

(00:30:50)

The tape is about to end, so Schafer notes he will go on to the first assignment on tape 2.

(SIDE B)

(00:31:36)

(Recording continues after a silent pause). (Distorted music).

(00:35:10)

(Recording is very distorted in the beginning, but improves somewhat over time). Schafer says this is Tape Number Two. He talks about how to do the assignment.

(00:37:40)

Schafer reviews what was discussed on Tape One, and then talks about the role of ceremonies. Ceremonies include laymen and specialists. Ceremonies are based on myths that the layman knows very little about.

(00:40:06)

Schafer discusses ceremonies of the Catholic Church. The layman is involved in the ceremony but is not involved in the overlying myth that the ceremony is based on. Underhill has a chapter on ceremonialism. Ceremonies are not worship but an institutionalized set of behaviors where man renews his relationship with the supernatural. Cheyenne Indians had a ceremony involving arrows that renewed their "Cheyenne-ness" and made them closer to their god. Ceremonies are not held haphazardly and they play an important social function.

(00:44:10)

Schafer says that ceremonies have changed over the years. Originally, they were performed to appease the gods. Schafer mentions the Rain Ceremony which was performed to appease the Rain God. Colorful costumes were a later invention, related to the arrival and influence of Europeans. Performance to the audience began taking on more significance. Dances are an important part of ceremonies. Schafer mentions Tlingit dancers in Ketchikan and Haines, who had elaborate dances and costumes – they enacted various rituals and myths such as the slaying of a bear and they performed in front of an audience. But the old people say that the ceremonies weren't done this way in the old days. The dances were held to please the bear, not an audience. And the dances did not contain such big motions – slight motions by hand and body were enough to symbolize the bear and the attack. The supernatural knew what the people were trying to convey with the ceremony by the purity of their mind and their devoutness, and so big motions weren't necessary. Schafer says this is true also among the Hopi, Navajo and Sioux.

(00:49:15)

Schafer talks about the Ghost Dance and how it was traditionally done quietly and with barely moving feet. He contrasts this to the dances performed at modern Indian powwows, where dances are performed for the audience. Many dances are dances now, but they used to be an important part of ceremonies – the function of dances has changed.

(00:50:05)

Schafer talks about Assignment 1B. He asks students to discuss what Underhill meant when she said there are two levels of religious understanding in any group. Schafer is interested in students' thoughts. The two levels of religious understanding are the "thinkers" and the "non-thinkers" or laymen.

(00:51:58)

Schafer says the concept of personal power has always been important in Native American religions. Among the Plains Indians who were war-oriented, people who could demonstrate certain aspects of personal power often took leadership roles in the group. They were viewed with respect, awe or fear. Women had the very special power of birth which men could not do, so this gave women a power, or there was a fear of women. Schafer says the fear of women changes from North to South – they are more feared in the North among the Athabascan and Canada tribes, but the further south one goes, the less this is true. Amulets and good luck charms are impersonal – the items can be shared. Animism is an important part of Native American religion – it's an important impersonal power. In animism, all things have spirits including rocks, trees, mountains and animals. This is most extreme in the Japanese Shinto religion. For example, a beautiful tree or rock might have a Shinto shrine in front of it commemorating or recognizing it. There are also many shrines to animals.

(00:57:32)

Schafer says that for Question D, discuss one major function of religion among the Sioux according to "Black Elk Speaks." The author discusses it abstractly so the student will have to think about the functions and roles. Do the other readings and put titles on paragraphs. Write what Loy has to say about the role of religion in human society. Loy writes about science and religion and discusses many Native American religions including the Crow and Hopi. Schafer hopes to learn a lot from student answers to the assignment. There are no right or wrong answers - just one's thoughts and how deep students penetrate into the problem.

(01:02:00)

(recording becomes inaudible)

(01:02:50/01:03:39)

(end of tape)