

The spirit world

The Sioux believed in Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit. He had created the world and all that lived. All living things had spirits of their own. This included animals, birds, fish and plants, as well as human beings. Even the rocks, trees and streams had spirits. These spirits were very important to the Sioux, and they believed that the spirits could influence their lives. These beliefs help to explain some of the things that the Sioux did.

Charms

When a child was born women acted as midwives. The baby's umbilical cord was dried and saved. It was kept in a case decorated with quill work or bead work, and shaped like a turtle for a girl, or like a lizard or rattlesnake for a boy. It was used as a plaything and then presented to the child when he or she was older. The Plains Indians believed that the cord that had given them life would also have great protective power for the rest of their life.



Dances and Ceremonies

These were used when the whole tribe needed to contact the spirits. Before hunting, they would dance a Buffalo Dance to get the spirit world to call the buffalo to them. After a victory in war they would dance the Scalp Dance to celebrate, and to thank the spirits for their help.

The most famous ceremony was the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance was used to get help or guidance from the spirit world. Sitting Bull had taken part on one for four days before his great vision of victory came. He had hoped for guidance

from the spirit world in his war against the US army. On other occasions individuals might dance the Sun Dance to get help from the spirit world, perhaps for someone who was ill in their family.

Sacred Land

The religion of the Sioux also affected their attitude to land. They believed they came from the earth, just like the plants and animals. When they died, they believed they returned to the land. They were part of the land, and such land could not be owned by one individual, or even one nation. The land was part of life itself. They called the land their mother, and they said that ploughing the land was like ripping their mother's breast.

Some land was particularly sacred, especially high places that were close to the spirit world. For the Sioux the Black Hills were sacred. This was where the first Sioux were saved from the great flood. It was the place where they took their dead for burial. It was there that their holy men went to seek guidance when the nation had an important decision to make.

Outside observers of Indian religion misunderstood many aspects of the Sioux's beliefs. The Sioux's attitude to land was one of the most misunderstood. It was also the greatest source of conflict, as the ownership of land became an increasingly tense issue over the period 1840-70. The Sioux were prepared to fight to the death over their sacred lands.



The Black Hills of South Dakota

Visions

One way to contact the spirits was through visions. Every Indian, male and female, wanted to have a vision. Young boys were expected to go in search of theirs. First, they might use the **Sweat Lodge** to clean their body. Then they would pray and go without food. Finally, they would receive their vision. This would be interpreted for them by the shaman (medicine man) and their adult name would be given, often based upon their vision. That is how Sitting Bull got his name.

Women could easily make contact with the spirit world, another reason for their importance in Sioux society. They developed this ability when they reached puberty and menstruated for the first time. They received training from a medicine woman on how to control their contacts with the spirit world. Then, just as boys did, they received their adult name.

These visions would help the Sioux throughout their lives. Before the Battle of Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull dreamed that he saw US army soldiers on horseback, riding just below the rim of the sun. They were upside down, and they were falling into the Sioux camp. He believed this meant that the soldiers would die in battle with the Sioux.

The medicine man

'Medicine man' was the name given by non-Indians to an Indian **SHAMAN** because he carried herbs. TO the Plains Indians there was a connection between religion and very aspect of their lives, including their health. For them, all spirit power was 'medicine'. They could cure sickness because he could use the power of the spirits. If a man like White Shield was ill it was because he was possessed by an evil spirit. The medicine man would try to drive out the spirit. As the patient believed in the power of the spirits he or she would be relieved if the medicine man said that the evil spirit was gone and so might well get better.

Medicine men also used practical remedies, such as ointments and potions made from herbs, to treat sickness. Plains Indians knew the medicinal properties of more than 2000 plants. The medicine men were consulted not only about

medical matters but also about every aspect of tribal life, from where to hunt the buffalo to when to go to war. They charged high fees, normally paid in ponies, and were known to return their fees if their treatments had been unsuccessful.



Circles

The Sioux believed in the circle of nature. They were physically surrounded by the circle of the horizon, the circle of their village, the circle of their councils, the circle of their tipi, the circle of their shield. They looked up at the circle of the sky, the circle of the sun and the circle of the moon. They lived through the circle of birth, childhood, adulthood, old age, second childhood and death.

Source 2 - Black Elk describes the importance of the circle in Indian beliefs

"Everything an Indian does is a circle, and that is because the power of the world works in circles, even the seasons form a great circle, and come back to where they were before. Our tipis are round like birds' nests, and they are set in a circle, where the Great Spirit meant to raise our children".