

CEREMONY: AN INDIGENOUS SOLEMNITY IN RUBY SLIPPERJACK'S *DOG TRACKS*

Mrs. J. Sharmila,

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Reg. No: 19123154012001, S.T.Hindu College, Nagercoil.
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012,
Tamilnadu, India.) Email: sharmilasuresh2908@gmail.com

Dr. V. S. Shiny,

Associate Professor, Department of English, S. T. Hindu College, Nagercoil. (Affiliated to
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamilnadu,
India.)

Abstract

Ceremonies play a pivotal role in the continuance of the human interaction. The Indigenous ceremonies are considered to be sacred and they bring people together for various occasions. It is distinct and remarkable for each community. The locale of the ceremony becomes colourful with rituals, songs, music, dance, feasts and giveaways. The ceremonies also play a crucial role in withholding the traditional knowledge and practices and also gets transmitted to its posterity. The present paper analyses the importance of ceremonies and its constituents and also exhibits the association of the Canadian Natives in their native environment.

Keywords: Ceremonies, Indigenous Canadians, Sacred Sites, Regalia, Medicine Man, Naming Ceremony, Spirit Name, Potluck, Ceremonial Music and Dance.

To celebrate the ceremonies is a basic inclination of mankind, and it is essential for human prevalence. It is a way of living where the real inhabitants of the land exhibit their gratitude to the sources of life through their everyday activities, ceremonies and rituals. Ceremonies play a rudimentary role in the subsistence of human social intercourse. It is performed to mark important events in the lives of individuals and communities. It conserves the basic aspects of humankind and celebrates the evolution of developmental phases. It integrates the community by bringing together the people together for the celebration. It enables the people to realize their affinity with the community. It mirrors the beliefs, hopes, traditions, culture, and spirituality of a community. Bobby Alexander in "Ceremony" opines, "Ceremony is conventionally defined as a highly formalized observance or practice prescribed by custom and undertaken by a collective, or as customary observances and practices considered as a whole."

In Native Canadian community ceremonies provide opportunities to meet acquaintances and kindred, where an individual could share his or her emotions of joy and sorrow. It leads to the act of healing. The individual ceremonies like birthdays, naming, and weddings bring the family members together. The traditional communal ceremonies are events of sacred, religious or social importance performed on special occasions. It brings the whole Indigenous community together and helps the children to know about their extended family and to form a strong bond and solidarity among them. It is performed on specific

occasions and educates the younger generation with the knowledge of their traditional customs and practices. It enables people to accept the changes in their own self and interrelationships. Indigenous Canadians possess collective consciousness as they have united thoughts and actions. Collective consciousness is a sociological concept, in which, a community or a social group has same beliefs, practices and knowledge. Emile Durkheim in “The Division of Labour in Society” postulates, “beliefs and sentiments common to all the members of the group” as collective conscience (129).

Ceremony is a kind of celebration, engaged and celebrated by the assemblage of the community members. Without exception, all ceremonies have distinct and significant locus in Native history. The ancestors have created ceremonies to invoke the succession in hunting, harvest and good weather conditions. The term Indigenous encloses all sorts of Native people including status Indian, non-status Indian, Aboriginal, Native, First Nation, Métis and Inuit. Indigenous are the original inhabitants of North America, which is also known as Turtle Island. In Canada, they are of three categories such as the First Nations, the Inuit, and the Métis. They have distinct chronicles, vernaculars, tradition and doctrines. Indigenous ceremonies strengthen the interconnection between the humans and environment and humans and spiritual world. The article “Important Indigenous Ceremonies” explicates, “Indigenous ceremonies seek to strengthen a person’s connection to the physical and spiritual world, provide healing or clarity, mark significant life moments, or offer remembrance and gratitude. Each ceremony has a specific purpose and holds an important place in Native history.” The rites in the ceremonies differ based on the purpose of the ceremony. The ceremonies and their rituals are diverse for each language and community group.

The traditional ceremonies found among the Indigenous peoples are Green Corn Ceremonies, Peyote Worship, Powwows, Potlatch, Sacred Cedar, Sundance, Shaking Tipi Ceremony, Masked Dance, Prairie-Chicken Dance, Pipe-stem Bundle Dance, Round Dance, Medicine Society Dance, Sweat Lodge, feasts and giveaways. The ceremonies are followed by feasts and giveaways, as cultural practice. The traditional foods served in the feasts include bush animals, plants, berries, corn, beans, and squash, wild rice, fish, bannock, and wild meat.

Ceremonial objects occupy a remarkable place in the execution of ceremonies. For certain ceremonies, ceremonial objects are created as drawings, mounds, carvings in clay or wood, bark paintings, scarring of trees, making ornaments, etc. These objects are destroyed after using in the ceremony. The objects are used in ceremonies with symbolic representations, for instance, a ceremonial pipe with tobacco represents prayer. Jeannine Auboyer in “Ceremonial Object” describes ceremonial object as, “any object used in a ritual or a religious ceremony. . . . Ceremonial and ritualistic objects have been utilized as a means for establishing or maintaining communication between the sacred and the profane.” Further, plants are the symbolic representation of transformation. The usage of tobacco, sage, sweet grass and cedar is for the purpose of remedial and refinement. There are also other ceremonial objects such as specific kinds of rocks, water, birds, and animals. The

symbolization of plants is different for each group. Sacred objects are believed to have life, courage, and supremacy of their own. Ceremonies are conducted based on seasonal period rather than specific dates.

Sacred sites add more value to the natural environment. They encourage the bond between the Indigenous culture and the spiritual existence in the atmosphere. Sacred sites are highly revered by Indigenous peoples. It includes hills, rocks, waterholes, trees, plains, lakes, billabongs and water resources including attributes inside and outside water. Leena Heinämäki and Thora Martina Herrmann in “The Recognition of Sacred Natural Sites of Arctic Indigenous Peoples as a Part of Their Right to Cultural Integrity” state, “Sacred Natural Sites are an important means for the expressions and transmission of culture, and a manifestation of spiritual values of nature, which have contributed to the conservation of species and habitats” (207). Presently, these sacred sites are acknowledged to be great areas of conservation of biodiversity and traditional practices.

Most of the Indigenous sacred sites are outside and far from the reserve boundaries. Indigenous peoples view their ancestral burial grounds as sacred, as it is central to Indigenous spirituality. The Native Americans have ceremonies for death and after life too. They believe that it is their responsibility to provide proper burial in proper place, if not they would undergo disturbance or desecration. The reason for the importance of the Native land is the ancestors are buried directly under the ground, so they become part of the earth and inseparable from their Native soil.

Sacred sites occupy a vital role in the spirituality of the Indigenous people in Canada. The ceremonial site is usually meant for the conduct of ceremonies. During ceremonies, people gather at the ceremonial site. The site is spread with spruce boughs, the boundary is marked with rocks and consists of a spot for fire smouldering. It is described in the novel as, “There were spruce boughs spread like a big fan outward from the centre of the ceremonial site. The outer perimeter was marked off by rock set in a circle and there was a central fire smouldering in the middle” (84).

In Indigenous cultures, clothes, accessories and artefacts that are worn during ceremonies are known as regalia. During ancient times, the traditional clothes were made from the natural products. Amanda Robinson in “Indigenous Regalia in Canada” describes, “Regalia in Indigenous cultures refers to the traditional and often sacred clothing, accessories and artefacts worn or carried during various ceremonies, such as powwows, celebrations and pan-national gatherings.” The receiver of the name appears in new regalia, as a sign of new identity and obligation towards their own name and community. During ceremonies, the community members appear in full traditional wear, which makes them look majestic and elegant. In the novel, the author describes the traditional dressing as follows:

Mom was dressed in a full traditional leather outfit loaded with beadwork and sashes. Maggie was wearing a blue cotton dress with blue and yellow ribbon trimmings and a blue shawl that had very long fringes that swayed when she walked. She also had a fully beaded belt and beaded hair clips that matched her outfit. She was also wearing a

fully beaded pair of moccasins. . . . Even Blink had on cotton pants, a shirt trimmed with ribbons, and beaded moccasins. (83)

Every human has a unique name and the Native child is given a name in the presence of family and friends. The name acquires a special place in the life of an individual and it becomes an identity of a person. In the Indigenous community, people have two kinds of names, namely, legal name and spirit name. The legal name is an official one, which is used for academic and bureaucratic purposes. The spirit name of a person is related to his community, ancestor, and his own unique quality. Native American children are made to realize that they are part of nature, initially by labelling them with names inferred from nature. Jessica Schrader, a journalist in “The Multifaceted Native American Naming Tradition: Reviving your Sense of Self” gives instances for the names taken from nature as, “Lily, Rose, and Violet.” In Indigenous communities, a traditional name is offered to an individual during naming ceremony, in the presence of friends, family and extended family. The traditional name or the spirit name has social, psychological and emotional impact. Also, it connects the individual to the world of nature, their community and spiritual world.

The consecration of the spirit name takes place under the headship of the Medicine Man. He primarily addresses the audience and the spirits of the ancestors and then introduces the receiver of the name with the spirit name. For instance, in Ruby Slipperjack’s *Dog Tracks*, during the naming ceremony of Abby, Medicine Man greets the people and the spirits and introduces Abby in her spirit name. Abby delineates as, “In his rather authoritative voice, the Medicine Man turned and addressed all the people there and the spirits that be, that from that time on, my name was “White-Throated Sparrow” (85). It shows that the spirit name is drawn from the environment and also in association with the quality of the receiver. In an article “Ojibwe Naming Ceremony” the Indigenous Canadians have the “belief of being named so the Great Spirit will know who you are when you pass on to the next world.”

The Indigenous people’s name is always formed in interconnection with the nature. In Naming Ceremony, certain rituals are followed, like lighting the fire, offering the tobacco to the Elders, the particular individual to be walked around the feast by the elder, sunrise ceremony, the lifting of the individual and then the name is given, meanwhile more tobacco is added to the fire. The smoke from the fire connects the creation (land) and the creator (sky). It is the symbolic representation of the connection between the universe and the Supreme Being. The traditional names are nature oriented and the animal names represent the special characteristics of the particular individual associated with that of the animal.

The association between an individual and his community is enhanced by ceremonies, particularly naming ceremony enforces the individual towards betterment, provides restoration and progression. A naming ceremony is a conventional and age old practice, commemorating the naming of an individual in the community. The purpose and process of Naming Ceremony vary from one community to another. It takes place as a breakthrough in life and honours both the named child and the family. It classically marks the progression of a child from childhood to maturity. In the past, the naming ceremony has a different notion,

either to name a child after an ancestor who had passed away or to name after a celestial being.

The Indigenous way of naming a child is believed to acquire spiritual significance. In Indigenous culture, the spiritual name is received through the Medicine Man/ Woman. Though the particular individual has a name already, he/she receives the traditional spiritual name in the naming ceremony. The naming period marks the developmental period of the person's maturity, with great respect. The beneficiary family of the naming ceremony offers gifts to the Medicine person, who awards the spiritual name and feast to all the participants. In Indigenous culture, the spirit name is essential, as it gives protection to the individual and strengthens the relation with the spirit world. It enables the individual to know his position in the creation. The spirit name is believed to be the ancestral name and also the person's name before his birth into this world. It has the power of healing and the exposition of the person's past, present and future.

The Natives have the perception that the spirit names have powers and potentiality to protect the individuals from difficulties and dangers. It shows that the name of a person has a special role assuring the defence of an individual. Albert Doja, a professor of Anthropology, in "Rituals of Naming and Exposure: Meaning and Signification in a Name" proclaims, "Names seem to have another special function, which is to protect individuals and keep them safe from evil powers, the evil eye, sickness or death" (241).

The Naming Ceremony is sustained by the Natives in memory of the ancient man's sacrifice in naming the creation. There are prerequisite practices to receive a name as follows: the parents of the child seek the medicinal person, and the latter seeks the spirit for the name by following strict measures such as abstaining food, meditation, appeal and invocation. The medicine person burns the tobacco as an offering and announces the name to four directions. Then the crowd repeats the new spiritual name. From then onwards, the spirit accepts and guards the named person and organizes a place in the spirit world for the afterlife of the particular person. The location becomes colourful with music, dance, food and socialization, which constitutes the important feature of Indigenous Canadian culture.

Names play a key role in establishing the identity of an individual. The traditional names have great reverence among the Indigenous people but due to the intervention of the colonizers the ceremonies have lost its significance. It is because the colonizers recorded the traditional names with incorrect spelling, and included the surnames. Further they registered the names of the Indian Agents instead of the Indian individuals. Thus the Native culture and heritage of the Indigenous people got eroded due to the colonizer and they tried to revive it through the naming ceremony. The retrieval of the traditional naming ceremony is a proficient approach of reclamation.

Naming ceremony is always followed by a feast and a return gift. The guests bring their own food and spread it on their blankets and they exchange their food. This is defined as potluck food. *Dog Tracks* describes it as, "The potluck food was spread out in one location and you just had to go and pick whatever you wanted to eat" (85). The potluck encourages the people to share their possessions and fulfil their needs. Also, it provides opportunity to

learn new information. Jeannie Nichols in “Preventing Potluck Paranoia” delineates, “a potluck is an event in which each guest or family who attends brings a portion of the meal to share with everyone. It’s a great opportunity to taste a wide variety of foods” (1).

The potluck is followed by powwow, a remarkable ceremony of the Canadian Natives. It provides space for the people to share food, stories, dance in majestic outfit and celebrate their Native ceremony together with their family and community. The author describes it as, “the drums started with the Grand Entry of the Powwow. . . . would continue until midnight. . . . it had been a long day and I was tired. The evening sun cast an orange glow against the clouds and the water was calm” (85- 86).

Further, the ceremonies are made more vibrant with the inclusion of ceremonial song, music and dances, which are sacred and specific for each ceremony. Each language group has their own individual songs, dances, ceremonial dress, ceremonial objects, instruments and ornamentation. These ceremonies act as a tool to connect the humans with the spiritual world. The aforesaid practices aid the Indigenous peoples to maintain their identity and existence. Ceremonies generate opportunities to share songs and dances, which pave way to promote relation and to resolve disputes.

Dance is considered as an indispensable part of the ceremonies. Further, songs, an important constituent of oral culture, are believed to serve the spiritual purpose of invoking the spirits. The participants of the ceremony dance together, according to the beat of the drums. The drums start to beat at the beginning of the ceremonies and events. The beat of the drums make the listeners to do movements accordingly. Barbara A. Hughes in “American Indian Dance: Steps to Cultural Preservation” affirms, “The drum is an integral part of powwow music. It is considered sacred and is treated with great respect by the drum groups” (179)

In the novel, Abby describes the dance to the beat of the drum as, “I found myself swaying to his movements as he danced to the beat of the drums. . . . When the next dance was called where everyone could join in, we all danced together.” The movement of the dancers is in clockwise and the women, who are undergo their menstrual cycle are not supposed to enter the circle. It is because the Native Canadians believe, ““Women are very strong at that time”” (86). The movement in circular motion indicates the life circle. The facing of the individual in four directions symbolizes the four seasons along with all the natural activities from four directions. Finally, the ceremony ends with a grand feast at the night. Hence, the occasion provides great opportunity to meet people, acquire information, have fun, and feel content. Hughes explicates “Dance has been pivotal in providing American Indians with a method of cultural preservation, a religious connection, and a community function” (176).

Ceremonies have played an immeasurable role in passing down the traditional knowledge to the rising generations. The conduct of the ceremonies enables the younger generation to get integrated to the community, to its cultural practices and to realize the greatness of their heritage. The Natives were forbidden to practice their traditional ceremonies by the colonial government, claiming it to be superstitious and squandering. The younger

Native generations have been compelled to feel low of their traditional practices, as they are insulted and made to feel ashamed of their indigeneity by the institutions run by the colonial, white government.

The impact of the intrusion of the colonizers is massive on the Indigenous people. The Natives become alien in their own land and are prohibited to perform their own cultural rites, rituals and practices. The western settlers drive the governments to devise policies to dismiss the Natives from the mainland to the reservations and in due course try to assimilate them in the white society. In the process of assimilation, many of the traditional habits and practices are lost and other non-native practices get mingled with the Native practices. But some of the Indigenous tribes still retain their original traditions with a lot of effort. The laws have been implemented to ban the traditional Indigenous ceremonies, blaming them to be illegal. The cultural ban ended in the year 1951. However, the Indigenous people were able to withstand the challenges and oppressions of the intruders and to retain their cultural treasures. The Indigenous life is nature-oriented and their tradition and culture are structured based on the ambiance of the environment. Realising the values and greatness of their ancient traditions, the Indigenous younger generations revive and adopt their traditional practices in an eminent way.

References

- Alexander, Bobby. "Ceremony." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Encyclopedia.com. 18 Mar. 2024, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/anthropology-and-archaeology/anthropology-terms-and-concepts/ceremony>.
- Auboyer, Jeannine. "Ceremonial Object." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Aug. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ceremonial-object>.
- Doja, Albert. "Rituals of Naming and Exposure: Meaning and Signification in a Name." *Onoma: Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences*, 2006, pp. 237-270, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00629438/document>.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labour in Society*. The Free Press of Glencoe, 1933.
- Heinämäki, Leena and Thora Martina Herrmann. "The Recognition of Sacred Natural Sites of Arctic Indigenous Peoples as a Part of Their Right to Cultural Integrity." *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 207–233. <https://site.uit.no/arcticreview/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2014/10/The-Recognition-of-Sacred-Natural.pdf>.
- Hughes, Barbara A. "American Indian Dance: Steps to Cultural Preservation." *High Plains Applied Anthropologist*, vol. 21, no. 2, fall 2001, pp. 176-181, <https://hpsfaa.org/Resources/Documents/AppliedAnthropologist-2001/fall2001/American%20Indian%20Dance-%20Steps%20to%20Cultural%20Preservation.pdf>.
- "Important Indigenous Ceremonies." *Tribal Trade*, 12 Nov. 2022, <https://tribaltradeco.com/blogs/teachings/important-indigenous-ceremonies>.
- Nichols, Jeannie. "Preventing Potluck Paranoia." *Michigan Food Safety*, www.canr.msu.edu/uploads/resources/pdfs/e3246_pdf.pdf.

“Ojibwe Naming Ceremony.” Spirit Canoe, University of Minnesota, 29 Dec. 2017,
<https://medium.com/spirit-canoe/anishinaabe-naming-ceremony-7289fc8f7605>.

Robinson, Amanda. “Indigenous Regalia in Canada.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 25 June 2018, *Historica Canada*, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indigenous-regalia-in-canada.

Slipperjack, Ruby. *Dog Tracks*. Fifth House, 2008.

Waugaman, Elisabeth Pearson. “The Multifaceted Native American Naming Tradition: Reviving Your Sense of Self.” *Psychology Today*, 5 Jan. 2015, www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/whats-in-name/201501/the-multifaceted-native-american-naming-tradition-0.