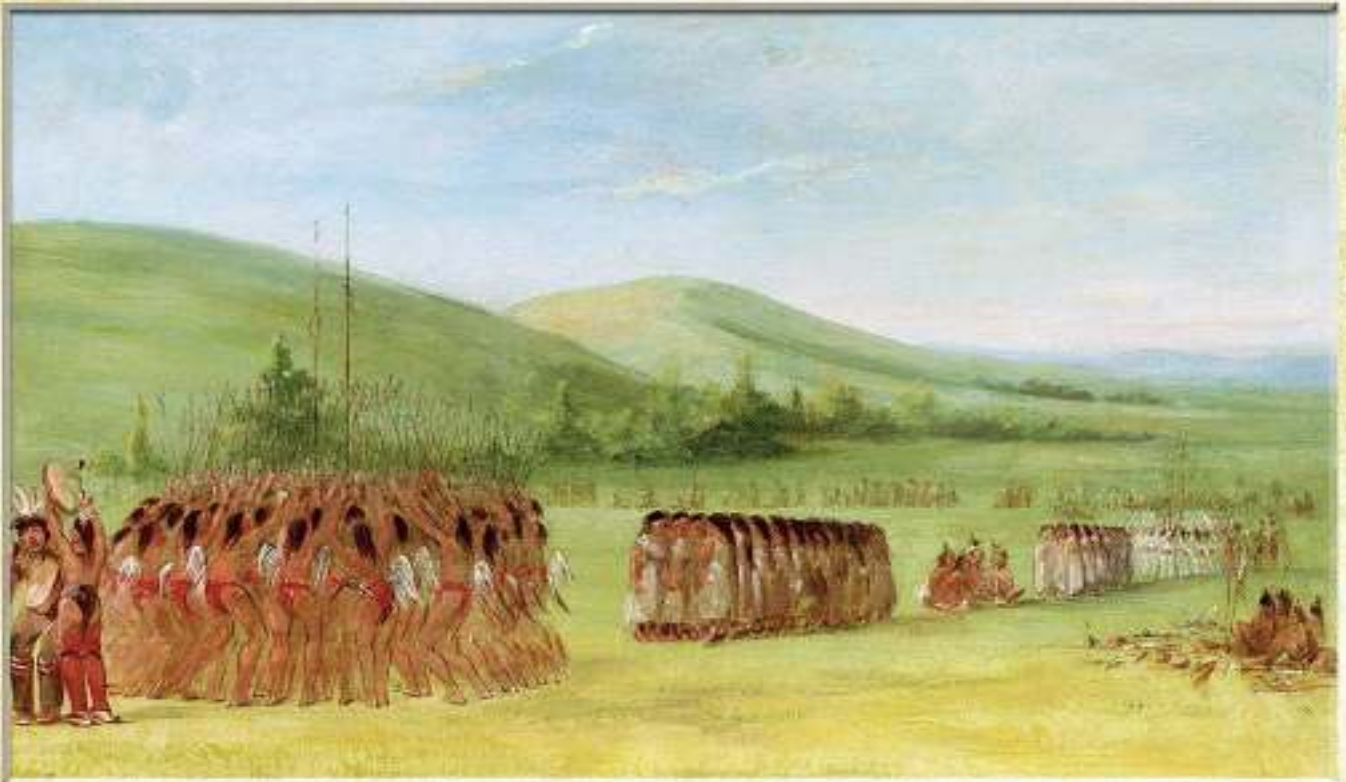


# NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE



## NATIVE AMERICAN FESTIVALS & CEREMONIES



*Jenna Glatzer*

SENIOR CONSULTING EDITOR DR. TROY JOHNSON  
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY & AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY



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**EUROPEANS AND NATIVE AMERICANS**

**HOMES OF THE NATIVE AMERICANS**

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# NATIVE AMERICAN FESTIVALS AND CEREMONIES

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**SENIOR CONSULTING EDITOR DR. TROY JOHNSON PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND  
AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY**



This book is dedicated to Paul Glatzer (the best brother in the world) and Marie Chieffo, because she never forgets a promise!



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# INTRODUCTION

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For hundreds of years the dominant image of the Native American has been that of a stoic warrior, often wearing a full-length eagle feather headdress, riding a horse in pursuit of the buffalo, or perhaps surrounding some unfortunate wagon train filled with innocent west-bound American settlers. Unfortunately there has been little written or made available to the general public to dispel this erroneous generalization. This misrepresentation has resulted in an image of native people that has been translated into books, movies, and television programs that have done little to look deeply into the native worldview, cosmology, and daily life. Not until the 1990 movie *Dances with Wolves* were native people portrayed as having a human persona. For the first time, native people could express humor, sorrow, love, hate, peace, and warfare. For the first time native people could express themselves in words other than “ugh” or “Yes, Kemo Sabe.” This series has been written to provide a more accurate and encompassing journey into the world of the Native Americans.

When studying the native world of the Americas, it is extremely important to understand that there are few “universals” that apply across tribal boundaries. With over 500 nations and 300 language groups the worlds of the Native Americans were diverse. The traditions of one group may or may not have been shared by neighboring groups. Sports, games, dance, subsistence patterns, clothing, and religion differed—greatly in some instances. And although nearly all native groups observed festivals and ceremonies necessary to insure the renewal of their worlds, these too varied greatly.

Of equal importance to the breaking down of old myopic and stereotypic images is that the authors in this series credit Native Americans with a sense of agency. Contrary to the views held by the Europeans who came to North and South America and established the United States, Canada, Mexico, and other nations, some Native American tribes had sophisticated political and governing structures—that of the member nations of the Iroquois League, for example. Europeans at first denied that native people had religions but rather “worshiped the devil,” and demanded that Native Americans abandon their religions for the Christian worldview. The readers of this series will learn that native people had well-established religions, led by both men and women, long before the European invasion began in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Gender roles also come under scrutiny in this series. European settlers in the northeastern area of the present-day United States found it appalling that native women were “treated as drudges” and forced to do the men’s work in the agricultural fields. They failed to understand, as the reader will see, that among this group the women owned the fields and scheduled the harvests. Europeans also failed to understand that Iroquois men were diplomats and controlled over one million square miles of fur-trapping area. While Iroquois men sat at the governing council, Iroquois clan matrons caucused with tribal members and told the men how to vote.

These are small examples of the material contained in this important series. The reader is encouraged to use the extended bibliographies provided with each book to expand his or her area of specific interest.

Dr. Troy Johnson  
Professor of History and American Indian Studies  
California State University





The native inhabitants of North and South America often danced at their ceremonies and festivals. The dances had different purposes, such as giving the dancers strength for a hunt or protection during battle.

# 1 Native American Festivals

---

Native Americans had many different kinds of festivals and ceremonies to honor different events, seasons, people, places, and elements of nature. Today, many of these celebrations still exist in Native American communities. Some have been lost over the years, but we can learn a lot about Native American peoples by studying these traditions: what was important to the people and what they hoped, believed, feared, and prayed for.

Festivals and ceremonies were held for different reasons. Usually, an event was meant to give thanks for good things (like successful hunts and harvests), to mark an important change in someone's life (like when boys and girls began adulthood), or to communicate with the spirits (asking them to bring rain or heal sick people, for instance). A ceremony was a holy, spiritual event, while a festival was less formal and more social. There were some sacred ceremonies only for women or only for men.

These festivals and ceremonies were colorful and exciting. Different tribes had different kinds of occasions, but they all shared things in common. For example, participants wore fancy clothing, often sang, danced, and played instruments, feasted on wonderful meals, held contests, smoked tobacco, and gave gifts. Keeping traditions alive was important to the Native Americans. Thus, there were certain "rules" the Native Americans followed, depending on the type of event. These rules were passed down from parents to children and family to family so they could remember the ways to celebrate, give thanks, remember the dead, and communicate with spirits.

What kind of holidays do you celebrate? You can probably name plenty of days your family celebrates—things like birthdays, weddings, and religious holidays. But have you ever thought about having a special party when the corn is ripe?

The Native Americans did. They called it the Green Corn Ceremony, and it was a big event for many tribes every summer. Parents and children would eagerly wait for the time when the corn had grown high enough and was almost ready to eat. Then they would gather together and throw a big celebration lasting almost a week.

That wasn't unusual for Native Americans. Many of their festivals and ceremonies lasted for several days. There were different traditions each day of the celebration. The activities often began before the sun rose and didn't end until late at night. Even young children were expected to participate, so parents would wake them early to join the activities.

Not all of the festivals and ceremonies were fun, either. Some of them involved physical torture for the warriors or scary experiences for the children. Several of the events were a test of endurance, stamina, and strength. To refuse to participate in these events could cause a person to lose **status** in the eyes of the tribe.





Members of Native American tribes created special, colorful clothing that they wore for their festivals and special occasions. This clothing is called regalia. Here, young members of the Squamish nation shows off their regalia at a powwow in Canada.

However, most Native Americans looked forward to the festivals and ceremonies, which were usually about celebrating, bringing families together, appreciating life, and having a good time.

The elaborate clothing Native Americans wore during important events is known as **regalia**, never as “costumes.” There are different rules and traditions regarding regalia for various occasions and in different areas. For example, certain types of feathers, colors, beads, animal skins, or other materials are appropriate for specific dances and specific tribes. Participants today may spend hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars on their regalia, which are all unique and made by hand.

**Because bald and golden eagles are protected, only Native Americans are allowed to own their feathers in the United States. If they want eagle feathers for use in ceremonies and regalia, they must apply to the National Eagle Repository and often have to wait over two years before they get their feathers.**

Today, there are a few festivals and ceremonies that non-natives can attend, but most ceremonies are only for Native Americans. Sometimes, Native Americans will invite a non-native friend to join in, but this is a special honor. You can't ask to participate—that's like knocking on someone's door and asking if you can come to dinner at their house. Instead, you must wait for an invitation.

This has happened, in part, because Native Americans are upset that non-natives have exploited

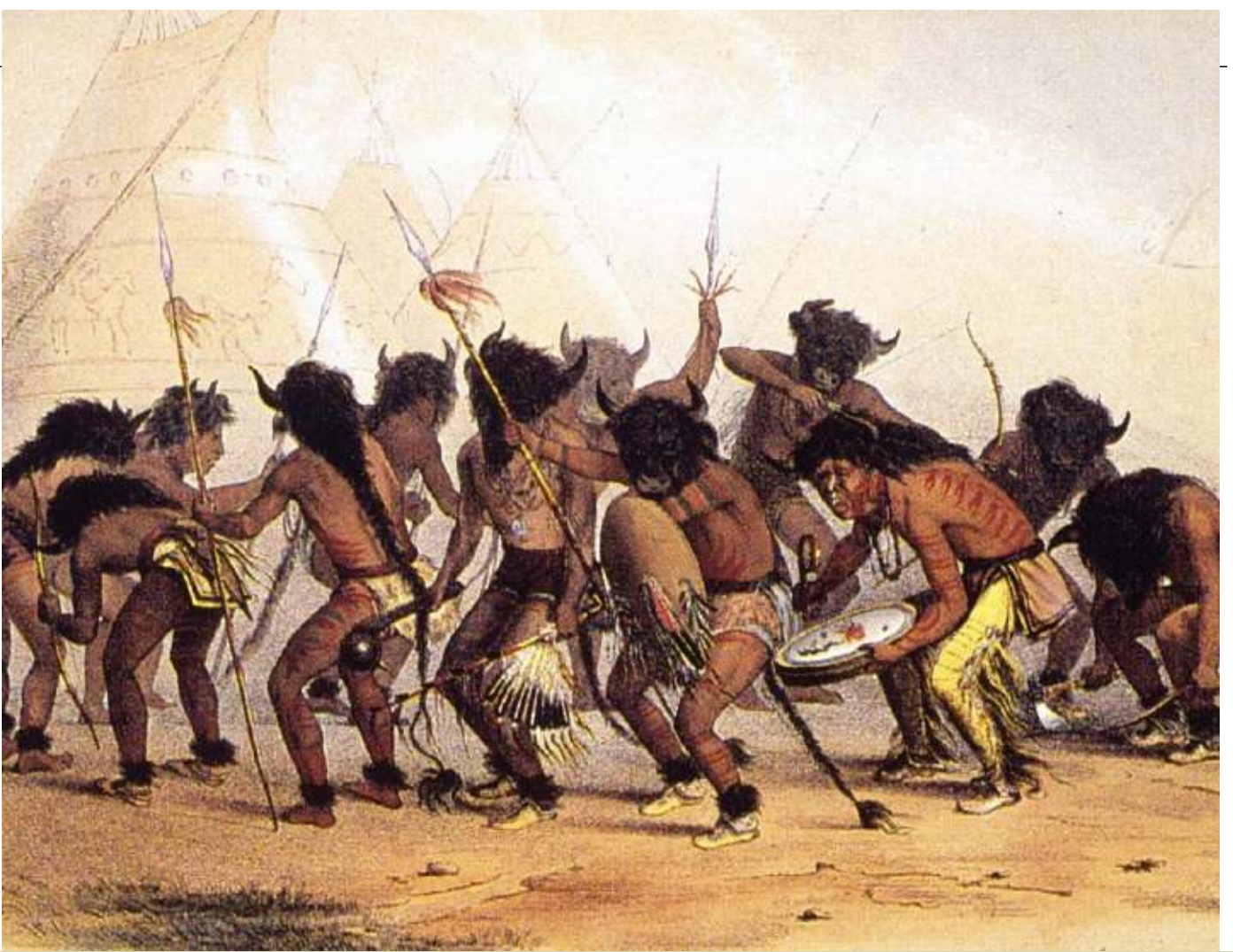
their customs. Sometimes, non-natives will learn about certain native ceremonies and practices, then lead their own groups teaching about “native ways.” This is insulting because many Native American ceremonies are sacred and cannot be

taken out of context. There are many cases of a non-native person selling classes or charging membership fees to ceremonies they claim are authentic. For this reason, it may take time for a non-native to gain the trust needed to earn an invitation to ceremonies. §



The dances done during festivals had various meanings, and sometimes led to other dances or ceremonies with different meanings. For example, the four Native Americans in this photograph are performing a Grass Dance. The Indians of the Great Plains originally did this dance in order to flatten the tall grass before a ceremony.





A group of Mandan hunters perform a buffalo dance in this painting from the mid-19th century. The dancers hold their weapons—bows, shields, and long spears—and wear buffalo-skin masks on their heads. The dance was believed to summon the buffalo herds. When killed, the animals would provide the Mandan tribe with food, clothing, and shelter.

## 2 Festivals of the Northeast

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The religious leaders (**shamans**) were in charge of the ceremonies, and they often had special areas of power. Some might be experts in healing, others in divining. With the help of spirits, they would attempt to pull sicknesses out of a person's body by blowing or sucking them out and chanting. Shamans could be men or women. They were generally older people, and they were highly respected.

The Iroquois (including the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca) had two important ceremonies: Midwinter and the Green Corn Ceremony. Midwinter, held in January or February each year, lasted over a week and celebrated the new year. It was a time for thanks and forgiveness, paying attention to dreams, and for starting new fires that would burn for the rest of the year. In Seneca tribes, messengers known as "Big Heads" would stir ashes with a big paddle, visiting each house to announce the start of the ritual. Traditionally, a white dog, symbolizing purity, would be sacrificed at the beginning of the ceremony and hung from a pole covered in red paint. The dog's body would later be burned. For days, people would concentrate on dream renewal and fulfillment.

The third day of Midwinter was something like Halloween. Groups of children walked through the village, guarded by an elderly woman, singing and dancing in return for "treats" of tobacco. If they didn't get a present, they could take whatever they wanted. Then came the games and dances, ending with the Four Sacred Rituals, which included the Feather Dance, Thanksgiving Dance, Personal Change, and Bowl Game.

The Green Corn Ceremony, which was celebrated by many different tribes, including the Iroquois, was held when the corn was ripe for harvest. It was forbidden to pick corn before the ceremony. Instead, people had to rely on leftover corn from the last season. They would bring freshly picked corn to the ceremony to share with other families.

The Iroquois had lots of other festivals, too, mostly dedicated to nature. These included the Maple, Strawberry, Bean, Thunder, Moon, and Sun ceremonies. After the rituals there were feasts, although sometimes people didn't stay and eat at the ceremony. Instead, they would take the food home with them.

The Cayugas had many individual rituals to help people stay healthy and lucky. When someone died, he or she was buried in a seated position with food and tools. Ten days later, a ceremony was held. If a chief died, the **condolence** ceremony was designed to mourn the loss and to bring in a new chief.

This was different from the funeral ceremony of the Kickapoo of Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin (and later, Illinois and Kansas). Their dead were buried in travel clothes with even more goods: spoons, tobacco, food, and water. Funerals included feasts, singing, prayer, and silence. After someone died, people in the village left for four days, then came back and often held an adoption ceremony. (When someone died, someone else could be "adopted" to replace the dead person.)

Mourning practices differed among tribes as well. Some groups would cut their hair or blacken their faces. In the Shawnee tribes, a replacement ceremony was common. In this ceremony a woman could formally choose a new husband to replace a husband who had died. This happened about a year after her original husband's death.





**An American artist named George Catlin made this drawing of Native Americans performing the Green Corn Ceremony. This summer ritual was the most sacred time of the year for many tribes of the southeast.**

Many ceremonies surrounded children and adolescents. For example, several tribes had a feast to celebrate a boy's first kill during a hunt. Most also had ceremonies for male and female puberty, when boys and girls were making the transition to adulthood.

A common practice among most native tribes was the "vision quest." Although this could take place at later times, most boys around the age of puberty were expected to **fast** and then go on an isolated quest to find a spiritual guide to help them for the rest of their lives. They might have meaningful visions or dreams during the quest. Members of the Fox tribe, which lived in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa, thought the vision quests were extremely important for boys. Those boys who had successful quests formed a medicine pack and would perform in two ceremonies every year.

**Initiates of the Midewiwin society kept secret records in the form of pictures on birch bark scrolls.**

There were other kinds of medicine groups in other tribes. The False Face Society, an important part of many northeastern tribes, wore wooden masks as they conducted ceremonies. Sick people could ask for help from the False Face Society. They usually used instruments, like rattles and drums as well as tobacco in their healing rituals. To attract good spirits, the Wyandotte of the St. Lawrence River Valley held a Dance of the Fire. During this ritual, participants had to touch boiling water and burning coals or stones.

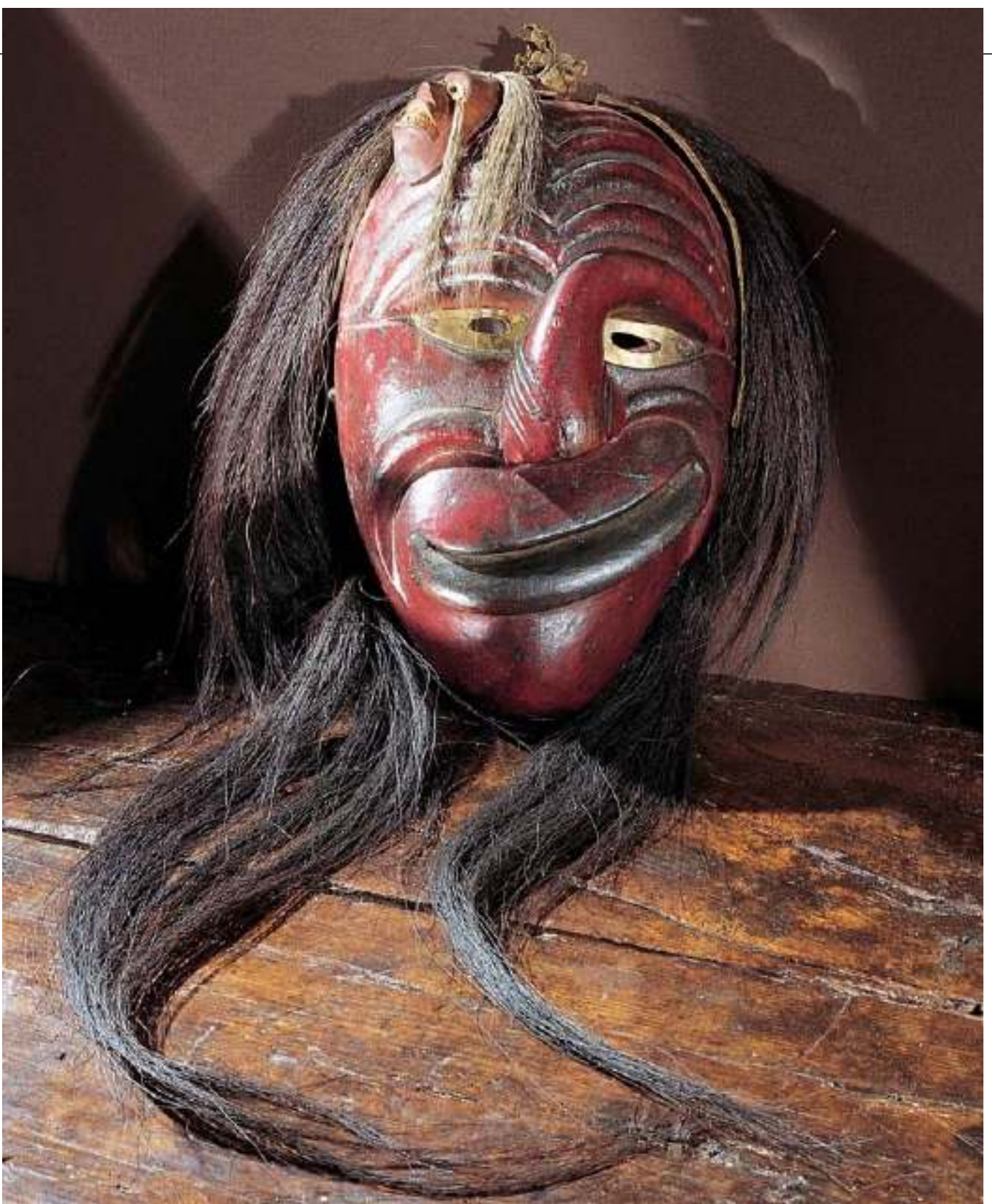
The most important Wyandotte ceremony was the Feast of the Dead, held once every 10 years. Family members would wrap bones for burial in a common grave, then tell stories, feast, give gifts, and play games to honor the dead. Algonquians, who lived in Ontario and Quebec, Canada, had a Feast of the Dead ceremony each year, which included a war dance. They invited guests to watch, and the host didn't eat while visitors were present.

**Members of the False Face Society had to make their own masks, or they could hire another member of the False Face Society to carve the mask for them. They would search through the woods until they found a tree (usually basswood) whose spirit “spoke” to them. They would then build a fire, offer tobacco, and cut out a section of the living tree to make the mask.**

The Narragansett people of Rhode Island changed their names several times throughout their lives during ceremonies. They also burned all of their material belongings in a yearly ceremony.

The “Midewiwin,” or Medicine Dance, probably arose in the 1600s because of the high death rate due to disease. Native Americans believed that sickness and disease came from the supernatural, therefore, they turned to the spirits to cure them, too. For the Anishinabe groups, who lived in what is now present-day Ontario, Canada, dreams were important, and in order to become a member of the Midewiwin curing society, a person had to report that he or she was having specific kinds of dreams or visions. Then, the man or woman paid a fee and followed instructions, waiting to find out if he or she would be accepted. During a secret yearly meeting, the new members would be chosen and injected with a sacred shell to gain spiritual powers. After this, they would wear medicine bags around their necks. They were well respected, but they were not considered shamans.





Members of the Iroquois False Face Society wore wooden masks like this one while performing religious or healing rituals. In spring and fall they went from house to house, shaking turtle-shell rattles and chanting to drive away the evil spirits that caused sickness.

The Shawnees had a Spring Bread Dance to ask for a good harvest and a Fall Bread Dance to express their gratitude for the harvest and ask for a good hunting season. They also had a War Dance in August. For as long as they lived, unless they misbehaved, the same 12 men hunted and the same 1

women cooked the feasts for these ceremonies.

~~Bears were significant in many festivals and ceremonies. The Lenni Len'pe tribes (part of the Algonquian tribes) had food-related ceremonies like the Iroquois, but their most important yearly festival was the bear sacrifice each winter. Bears were **revered** in the Anishinabe tribes, too, and they also had a sacred bear ceremony. The Micmac of Quebec and the Maritime provinces believed bears could change themselves into other kinds of creatures.~~

The Delawares, part of the Len'pe tribes, had a Big House Ceremony every fall, which lasted about a week, and included storytelling, singing, dancing, and feasting. During the 19th century, they also held Grease Drinking ceremonies. Participants would drink the grease of a bear or hog and pour some of it into a fire in the hopes that great visions would come to them. §





This Crow medicine bundle was made by wrapping an eagle's body in cloth. Straps were attached so it could be suspended during rituals. The eagle was chosen because it was seen in a vision by the creator of the bundle. Native Americans believed the eagle was an animal of great power.

### 3 Festivals of the Southeast

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The Black Drink Ceremony was held by the Choctaw, Creek, and Cherokee tribes. (Some called it the “white drink” to represent purity, or the color of the foam on top of the drink.) The tribes made a drink full of caffeine and served it in a **conch** shell or pottery bowl. In normal quantities, this could act like coffee, giving an extra boost of energy. But in large quantities, it would make people vomit and sweat heavily. This was supposed to cleanse their bodies and minds to make them pure. Alabama began almost all of their ceremonies and councils with a “black drink” tea.

During the Green Corn Ceremony (also known as *itse selu*, or Busk), all of the tribes in this area did some “spring cleaning,” making sure houses and common areas were neat and clean. The ceremony included purification rituals, meant to cleanse the body and the mind. All household fires were put out, and a high priest would light a new main fire. People would use the main fire to light new fires for their homes. Some tribes also held this ceremony for the forgiveness of crimes. The Cherokees held this ceremony for four days, when the last corn crop had ripened. After sundown dances had finished, storytelling would begin. This was a favorite part of the ceremony for children.

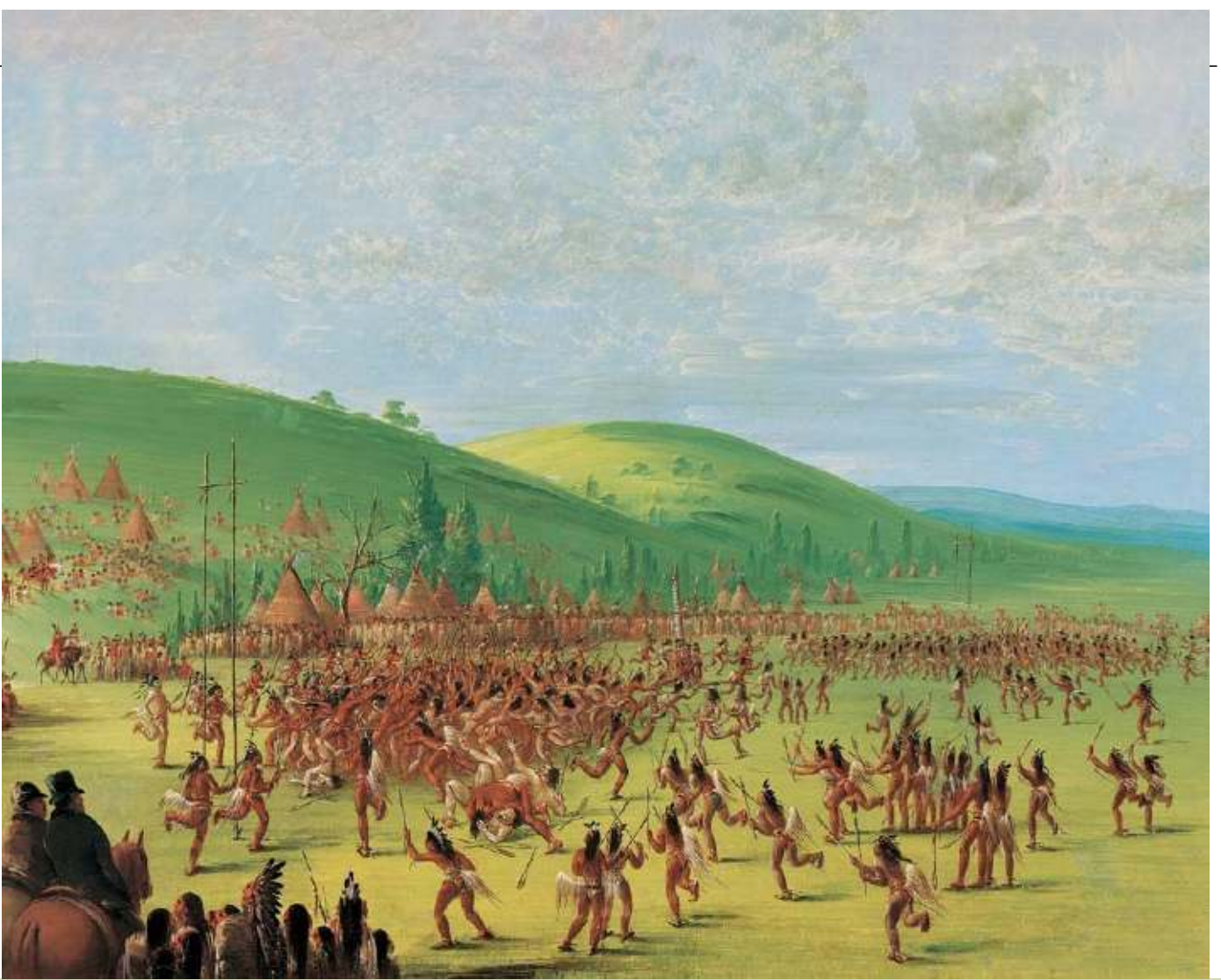
Children in Seminole families look forward to this ceremony today. Their families drive to swamplands in the Florida Everglades to meet other Seminole families for the event. Every afternoon during the celebration, they get together to play Seminole ball. In this game, children use rackets made out of branches to catch and throw a deerskin ball. The object is to hit the ball into a pole in the middle. Each time a team hits the pole, they make a mark on the pole to keep score.

Another important part of the ritual for the Seminoles is the medicine bundle. The tribe believes that this bundle holds magic powers, and they fear that the tribe will die if anything bad happens to it. Therefore, it is hidden in a secret spot in the swamp, and only the medicine man is allowed to touch it. Several times throughout the Green Corn Ceremony, the medicine man opens the bundle to make sure all of the contents are safely in place. Inside are stones, powder, bones, snake fangs, and other items. Men and women perform several dances around the bundle, honoring different animals. Then the medicine man goes back into the swamps to hide the bundle again until the following year.





During ceremonies, this medicine bundle was opened and women danced with the weasel skins inside. This was believed to ensure the abundance of the tribe's crop of tobacco, as well as the fertility and growth of the tribe as a whole.



This painting shows members of a Choctaw tribe participating in a traditional ball game. Sports and games were often important elements of Native American ceremonies.

For Chickasaw ceremonies, two head priests, known as *hopaye*, led the rituals. They wore special clothes and interpreted spiritual matters. Village men painted their faces during ceremonies. When someone died, his or her face would be painted, too. They had elaborate ceremonies for the dead, burying them in sitting positions in graves under homes. For three days after someone died, there were no social activities in the village.

Chickasaws danced both for fun and for spiritual purposes. Today, they have an annual festival each fall, with traditional foods like cracked corn, pork, and poke greens.

**Lacrosse** and other sports and games were important to tribes in the southeast. For some, sports included ceremonies and rituals involving gambling and tobacco. Days before a lacrosse game, Choctaws would conduct ceremonies. Shamans would help the players by boosting their spiritual power to help them win. Both the sport and the gambling beforehand were dangerous businesses; the gambling might leave a person broke financially, and the lacrosse might leave a person with broken bones. There weren't many rules, and the game was often played to settle arguments.

Tobacco was an important part of almost all public ceremonies in the southeast. Medicine societies used tobacco juices and teas to cure sickness and ease insect bites. Tribal councils smoked tobacco before discussing war matters. Creeks scattered it around new houses to keep ghosts away. Native Americans saw tobacco as a spiritual tool; the smoke was a prayer that was going up to the

Great Spirit. They smoked it to keep peace, change the weather, cure illness, and more. When European settlers arrived, they began selling tobacco for profit, which was considered a great insult to the natives. When a Choctaw died, his or her head was painted red, and an animal might be sacrificed to travel with the person to the land of the dead. At certain times throughout the day, there were “official” times for mourning and crying. The Choctaw even paid some people to mourn for them. Afterwards, the dead person’s house was burned down, and the body was left out to decompose. Later someone would scrape off any leftover flesh and return the bones to the person’s family.

**When a Natchez Great Chief or Woman Chief died, sometimes over 100 people would sacrifice their lives to accompany him or her into the afterworld.**

In the Natchez tribe (which no longer exists), people had different ranks according to whether they were nobles or commoners. Nobles had to marry commoners (called “stinkards”), and when a noble died, his or her spouse would be sacrificed, too, along with any servants. They were supposed to provide the deceased with company into the afterlife. The noble would be laid out on a platform after death, and his house would be burned. Commoners would usually be buried in the ground. It was believed that if a person behaved well on earth, he or she would be rewarded in the afterlife. If a person behaved badly, he or she would wind up in torment, surrounded by mosquitoes and eating spoiled fish.

**In Chickasaw tribes, it was not acceptable for anyone to refer to dead people directly by name, as it was felt that this would draw the dead person’s ghost to whoever said the name.**

Tuscaroras also had different burial ceremonies depending on the person’s social rank. A higher-ranking person would command a more expensive and complex burial. Mourners would paint their faces black and visit the dead in a special hut for the first day. Then, the deceased would be wrapped in blankets and mats, and a shaman would deliver a long funeral speech. Villagers would build a house around the grave. The bodies of chiefs would be removed later, so their bones could be cleaned, wrapped in deerskins, and buried next to the bones of other past chiefs.

The Chitimachas had a six-day Midsummer ceremony, held in a small temple. Young men were initiated as adults during this ceremony, and they were expected to fast and dance until they wore themselves out. They also had interesting customs surrounding deaths. It is thought that the tribes had “Buzzard Men” who would take a dead body, take off all the flesh, and give the clean bones back to the deceased person’s family for burial. They also held ceremonies when a war chief’s bones were buried. §





The Ghost Dance started among the Sioux around 1889, but the ritual soon spread throughout the Native American tribes of the West. It was centered on a belief that through performing the dance, the buffalo would return, as would the spirits of dead warriors, who would help force the white men to leave tribal lands. Some of the dancers wore special, colorfully decorated shirts, called Ghost Shirts. They believed these would protect them against bullets. However, a tragic clash at Wounded Knee Creek proved this idea to be false. In December 1890 a group of 350 Sioux camped at Wounded Knee Creek was attacked by the U.S. Cavalry, and hundreds of unarmed men, women, and children were massacred.

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