Native American
Spirituality, Symbolism, & Rituals
Native American Spirituality

- Native Americans did not all follow one particular religion
- Certain beliefs were widespread among different groups
- Beliefs and traditions formed an integral part of everyday life
Animism

- Native groups did not always distinguish between the animate and inanimate
- Everything embodied life and was considered to be in a conscious state of being
- Plants, animals, rocks, rivers, mountains, even things like thunder and shadows all possessed a soul or spirit
- Everything in the world co-existed and was owned by no one
- There is no separation between the physical and spiritual worlds
Shamanism

- A range of beliefs and practices regarding communication with the spiritual world
- A practitioner of shamanism is known as a shaman
- Shamans are believed to be messengers between the human world and the spirit worlds
- Shamans are said to treat ailments/illness by mending the soul (for this reason, a shaman is sometimes called a medicine man)
- The shaman also enters supernatural realms or dimensions to obtain solutions to problems afflicting the community
Myths

• Stories were handed down **orally** from one generation to the next
• They included stories about the **origin of the world** and its components — both living and non-living
• Example — several Native bands (including the Iroquois and Ojibwa) believed the world existed on the back of a giant turtle and referred to North America as “Turtle Island”
• Often, stories would be enhanced by miming and **theatrics**
Vision Quests

• A way to make a powerful and personal connection with the spirit world
• A rite of passage or initiation often undertaken at puberty, or during times of personal doubt
• Preparations involve a time of fasting and the guidance of a shaman
• Usually a journey alone into the wilderness seeking personal growth and spiritual guidance
• Leads to maturity and an understanding of our responsibility to ourselves, our society, our natural environment, and our soul
• Typically lasts two to four days, but sometimes longer — whatever is required to get the answer one seeks
Purification Rituals

Smudging:

• Native ceremonies or gatherings often begin with the burning of a sacred product, such as sweet grass, cedar, sage, or tobacco

• People *smudge* themselves by fanning the smoke over their bodies

• The burning acts as an offering to the spirits and the smoke cleanses the body and mind

How to smudge:

• Place the materials into a clay bowl. Light on fire and let the smoke start to rise. Rub your hands in the smoke and bring it to your body (head, heart, and solar plexus). Listen carefully, for the Ancestors have come along with the spirit of the plants. A relationship is being formed between you, the plant spirits, and the ancestors.
Purification Rituals

Sweat Lodges:

• A constructed dome made of saplings
• Framework is then covered with animal skins, blankets, tarps, and/or cedar boughs to form a small, dark, sealed place
• Hot stones are placed in a small pit at the centre of the lodge and water is poured over the stones to produce steam
• The steam purifies the mind and body
• There are often rounds of prayer and sometimes a sacred pipe is shared
• An elder or shaman usually leads the sweat lodge ceremony
Medicine Wheel

- A symbol that acts as a metaphor for a variety of spiritual concepts
- The term “medicine” does not refer to drugs or remedies
- The Medicine Wheel and its teachings assist individuals along the path toward mental, spiritual, emotional and physical enlightenment
- Physical medicine wheels made of stone have been constructed by several different Native groups
- Some stone wheels have been dated to over 4,500 years old
Medicine Wheel

- The Medicine Wheel is a representation of how all things in the natural world come in fours:
  - four directions (North, East, South, West)
  - four seasons (Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall)
  - four stages of life (Infant, Child, Adult, Elder)
  - four basic elements (Air, Water, Earth, Fire)
  - four states of being (Physical, Mental, Spiritual, Emotional)
  - four sacred medicines (Sage, Cedar, Sweet Grass, Tobacco)

- The Medicine Wheel represents the wholeness of life and the importance of maintaining balance