

Conference Presentation  
“A comprehension of the world that is peculiarly native....”  
N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa-Cherokee)

About this Presentation (Lecture)

N. Scott Momaday (now 79 years old) is a retired English Professor, and a Native American of Kiowa-Cherokee heritage. His book “The Way to Rainy Mountain” received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969, and “led to a breakthrough of Native American literature into the mainstream” (Wikipedia).

This lecture (approximately 60 minutes long on cassette tape), given as a presentation at a conference, is commentary on

- 1) a “comprehension of the world that is peculiarly native”
- 2) a prayer from the Navajo Night Chant Ceremony
- 3) the theme of religion and the humanization (or dehumanization) of man
- 4) on the magic of words and names (“KOSAN,” I said)
- 5) on storytelling as part of preserving the racial memory (“Who is the storyteller? Of whom is the story told?”)
- 6) on ceremonies as part of preserving a connection with the ancient beginnings (“As it used to be long ago, may I walk”; “After a long preparation, preparation of my mind and spirit, my grandmother, my father and I were ushered into Tia-me’s presence”)
- 7) how adopting particular stories (Example: interpreting catastrophic events) is an example of the power language and imagination can exert on whole cultures

Mr. Momaday uses complex intellectual language at times; however, this is because the topics he is talking about are complex. His presentation includes very unique stories which illustrate his points—and the presentation as a whole provides listeners with much insight into a “native” world view common to many Native American tribes. He is also very straightforward in his comments about the aggressive nature of European expansion into what once was the homeland for Native American tribes.

In January, 1973, there was a week long program at Rockford College (Illinois) (John A. Howard, Ph.D., presiding president) devoted to American Indian Culture. This lecture may have been the presentation given by Mr. Momaday during that program (I have not found anything like this presentation in any of Mr. Momadays’ books, or other publications). An audio cassette recording of the presentation was shared with me (winter, 1985) by students at Appalachian State University (Boone, North Carolina), who were taking a class in Comparative Philosophy and Religion (the audio cassette recording being part of the materials made available relating to class assignments). The students were getting their room and board at the ASU summer camp (Camp Broadstone), where I was working as a cook.

[Note: I have had a transcribed hard copy for years. Now I am sharing this presentation by making a pdf version accessible. I still have a copy of the audio cassette recording. SP]

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There is a Navajo ceremonial song which celebrates the sounds that are made in the natural world, the particular voices that beautify the earth. It proceeds in this way:

Voice of thunder, speak from the dark of clouds  
 Voice below, grasshopper voice, speak from the green of plants  
 So may the earth be beautiful

There is, in the idea of this song, a comprehension of the world that is peculiarly native, I believe... that is integral in the Navajo, indeed in the American Indian mentality. The singer stands at the center of sound, of motion, of life; nothing within the whole sphere of being is inaccessible to him or lost upon him. At least we have the sense that this is so, and so does he. His song is full of reverence, of wonder and delight, and of confidence as well. He knows something about himself and about the world, and he knows that he knows. He is at peace.

I am interested in what he sees and hears, in the range and force of his perception. Our immediate impression may be his perception is vertical: voice above, voice below he says. But is it vertical? Is it vertical only?

At each level of his expression there is an elaboration of sound and substance: the voice above is the voice of thunder, and thunder rolls. Moreover, it issues from the impalpable dark clouds, and runs upon their horizontal range. It is a sound which integrates the whole of the atmosphere. And even so, the voice below, the voice of the cricket say, issues from the whole landscape and multiplicity of plants. The singer points to nothing in particular, and to everything in general. We are given the wide angle of his vision and his hearing.

This comprehension of the earth and air, in language, is a matter of morality I believe, for it brings into account, not only man's instinctive reaction to this environment, but the full realization of his humanity as well—the achievement of his intellectual and spiritual development as an individual and as a race.

Let me give you another example of this calm and comprehensive view of things, this world view, as it is sometimes called. Here is a prayer from the Night Chant of the Navajo; and as you listen to it, consider if you will the special character of the singer, the quality of his vision and of his being, and—particularly at the end—consider the location of his voice in time and space.

Tsegihí

House made of dawn  
 House made of evening light  
 House made of the dark cloud  
 House made of male rain  
 House made of dark mist  
 House made of female rain  
 House made of pollen

House made of grasshoppers  
 Dark cloud is at the door  
 The trail out of it is dark cloud  
 Zig zag lightning stands high upon it  
 Male Diety  
 Your offering I make  
 I have prepared a smoke for you

Restore my feet for me  
 Restore my legs for me  
 Restore my body for me  
 Restore my mind for me  
 Restore my voice for me  
 This very day take out your spell for me  
 Your spell remove for me  
 You've taken it away for me  
 Far off it has gone  
 Happily I recover  
 Happily I go forth, my interior feeling cool (May I walk)  
 No longer sore, may I walk  
 Impervious to pain, may I walk  
 With lively feelings, may I walk  
 As it used to be, long ago, may I walk  
 Happily, may I walk

Happily with abundant dark clouds may I walk  
 Happily with abundant showers may I walk  
 Happily with abundant plants may I walk  
 Happily on a trail of pollen may I walk  
 Happily, may I walk  
 Being as it used to be long ago, may I walk

May it be beautiful before me  
 May it be beautiful behind me  
 May it be beautiful below me  
 May it be beautiful above me  
 May it be beautiful all around me  
 In beauty it is finished

It is by no means accidental or insignificant that in both of these ceremonial songs the singer should have ended upon the notion of beauty... beauty in the physical world—of man in the very presence and full awareness of that beauty. Neither is it insignificant that this whole and aesthetic sense should be expressed in language. Man has always tried to represent, and even re-create the world in words... One of our most venerable metaphors for poetry is that of the Renaissance man, holding up the mirror of language to the face of Nature.

Nor, of course, is it accidental or insignificant that we have here, at the very center of the singer's purpose, the language of prayer. The house of this prayer is the physical world itself. The singer affirms to his listeners, those who by virtue of their spiritual cohesion, share in his devotion, that he has a whole and irrevocable investment in the whole world.

At the level of rational statement, the prayer is profoundly simple and direct: the singer acknowledges the sacred reality of the world in its various aspects; and to that reality he makes his prayer as an offering, a pledge as it were, of his integral involvement in it. He aspires to the very restoration of his body, mind, and spirit; which in his culture—in his cultural and religious frame of reference—is preeminently an aesthetics... a perception of well-ordered being and beauty of which he is the human center... and the efficacy of his prayer is realized even as he makes it—in beauty it is finished.

This is, of course, but one dimension of the experience. There are others. The Indian, to a greater degree than most of us know perhaps, locates the center of his being within the element of language. This prayer from the Night Chant is a case in point. The verbal formula is itself a religious context; that is to say, it is carefully prescribed and traditional—it is not the singer's own device, but a current into which he enters and is sustained in spirit. He believes that language is intrinsically powerful, and that it is yet another, and indeed indispensable, dimension of the house in which he dwells. It is moreover the dimension in which his existence is fully accomplished. He does not create language, but is himself *created within it*. In a real sense, his language is both the object and instrument of his religious experience.

In her perceptive commentary on the prose and poetry of the American Indian, Margo Astrov wrote this:

The singing of songs and the telling of tales with the American Indian is but seldom a means of mere spontaneous self expression. More often than not, the singer aims with the chanted word to exert a strong influence and to bring about a change, either in himself, or in nature, or in his fellow beings. By narrating the story of origin, he endeavors to influence the universe and to strengthen the failing power of the supernatural beings. He relates the myth of creation, ceremonially, in order to save the world from death and destruction, and to keep alive the primeval spirit of the sacred beginning. Above all, it seems that the word, both in song and in tale, was meant to maintain and to prolong the individual life in some way or other; that is, to cure, to heal, to ward off evil, and to frustrate death. The word indeed is power—it is life, substance, reality. The word lived before earth, sun, or moon came into existence. Whenever the Indian ponders over the mystery of origin, he shows a tendency to ascribe to the word a creative power all its own. The word is conceived of as an independent entity, superior even to the gods. Only when the word came up mysteriously in the darkness of the night, were the gods of the Maya enabled to bring forth the earth and life thereon. And the genesis of the Weetoto opens characteristically enough in this way: "In the beginning, the word gave origin to the father...."

Another dimension of this experience is of course the ceremony itself, of which this prayer, the prayer from the Night Chant, is but a small part. It is elaborate, and of long duration, enveloping as it proceeds myriad other components of the relationship between man and the universe. Always, in his religious expression, the Indian is concerned to bring virtually all of his being to bear upon the act of spiritual affirmation. He brings his human strength to bear on it—the whole strength of his body, his mind—and these forces he integrates in an imitation of the physical world, and of its creatures. Nor is it imitation

only, as we are inclined to think of that term. Rather it is more truly a kind of incorporation and synthesis—and appropriation—of all that touches upon him in his coming and going.

This is difficult for most of us to understand perhaps, and it gives rise to certain ironies. The idea of appropriation, and of the related terms appropriateness, and propriety, is at the heart of Indian religion.

Sometime ago, I was told the story of an Indian, an Indian man, who had come upon bad times. He was without work, and he had a wife and children to support; moreover his wife was expecting another child. One day a friend came to visit, and perceived that the man's situation was bad. He said to him, "My friend, I see that you are poor, that you have no work and many mouths to feed, and there is no fresh meat in your larder. Now I know you to be a hunter, and I know that there are deer in the mountains close by. Why do you not kill a deer in order that you and yours might have fresh meat to eat?" And after a time the man replied, "No. You see it is inappropriate that I should take life just now, when I am expecting the gift of life."

In one of his books, Vine DeLoria, Jr. writes of an Indian woman whose child has died. A Christian man of the cloth comes to her, thinking to comfort her. She should not grieve, he says, for her child has succeeded to another and eternal life. But in this there is no solace for the woman, for grief is the appropriate expression of her life at the moment, and it is the only expression worthy of her, and of her child.

When my father was a boy, an old man used to come to the house which my grandfather Mamdete built near Rainy Mountain Creek. He was a lean old man in braids, and was impressive in his age and bearing. His name was Chaney. Every morning, my father tells me, Chaney would paint his wrinkled face, go out, and pray aloud to the rising sun. I like to hear of that old man. I like to watch him make his prayer with the eyes of my mind, though I am nearly ashamed to intrude upon so much privacy. Old man Chaney had come to terms with himself and with his world—he did not for a moment doubt the source of his strength; and each morning he returned to it his wonder and his words.

The earth where Chaney prayed is a deep red, and it bears the innumerable wounds of erosion. It is a huge land, so huge that only sound can take possession of it. A single tree can dominate the plain, but nothing can fill it. It's the kind of landscape in which a man is seen always against the sky, and the man on the back of a horse is regal. The air is hot and clear and filled with an essence that qualifies all objects in the eye and ear. There in early summer I have seen the sun rise out of the ground, an immense red-orange disk scarcely brighter than the moon... beautiful and strange and health-giving. It was old man Chaney's god.

The Sun Dance. The sun dance was the great medicine dance of the Kiowas, and of other tribes on the great plains. It was held, the Kiowas sun dance was held, at least once each year, at the time and place designated by the Tia-me keeper. All the bands of the tribe converged upon the sun dance place, and camped in the presence of the great ancestral medicine.

The institution of the Sun Dance was a concerted expression of tribal integrity. As a social event, it was a time for the exchange of gossip and of wares; an opportunity to show off prize possessions; a festive occasion upon which to take stock of blood resources and prospects... but it was preeminently an act of faith, a religious declaration. It restored power to the people, spiritual power. It invested them with purpose, and therefore, dignity and strength. It enabled them for a moment to come to terms with

divinity, to send their voices, however frail, against the silence at the edge of the world. During the dance Tia-me was exposed to view. It was suspended from a branch of the sacred tree in the sun dance lodge. The rest of the time it was, and is now, kept in a par-flesh, which is wrapped in a blanket and bound with strips of ticking.

The Sun Dance proper lasted four days and four nights. A buffalo bull was killed, its hide draped upon the limbs of the sacred tree, and its head impaled at the top. The buffalo was from the beginning the thread of life. It was food and shelter, god and beast. The head of a buffalo bull, uppermost on the Tia-me tree, its terrified dead eyes fixed on the skyline to the east, was the symbol of life itself—and nothing could have been more perfectly symbolic. The Kiowas could have conceived of no greater sacrifice. The principal dancers fasted the four days through, and danced to the edge of exhaustion. Paintings of the sun and moon were made on their bodies, and later the flesh was cut away so that the images were permanent.

Far more intimately than we can easily imagine, the Kiowas bound themselves to their religion. Their commitment to faith and morality and humane conduct was total and deliberate—and above all, *natural*. The most natural and appropriate realization of their humanity in the world. Although the Sun Dance became the supreme religious institution of a young and short lived culture—the last culture to evolve upon the North American continent—it was unspeakably old in itself... as old as the need of man to know his gods.

There is an unhappy sequel to this. The Sun Dance died away because it was forbidden to exist by the white man, and because the white man destroyed the buffalo. The last Kiowa Sun Dance was held in 1887 on a tributary of the Washataw River, above Rainy Mountain Creek. The buffalo were gone. In order to have their dance, the Kiowas had to buy an animal from the domestic herd which Charles Goodnight preserved in Texas.

In 1889 a Sun Dance was planned, but it was found out, and prevented by the soldiers at Fort Sill. On that occasion, the Kiowas were going to suspend an old buffalo robe from the sacred tree. Perhaps the most immoral act ever committed against the land was the senseless killing of the buffalo. The loss of the Sun Dance was the blow that killed the native Kiowa culture. The Kiowas might have endured every privation but that, the desecration of their faith. Without their religion, there was nothing to sustain them in spirit. Subsequent acceptance of the ghost dance, of peyote, and of Christianity were pathetic attempts to revive the old dieties. They had become a people whose spirit were broken.

And here is the saddest irony of all: that inhumanity is all too frequently the underside of religious experience. Human history is rife with examples of religious persecution, and no chapter more than that in which the American Indian figures—for no segment of humanity has been more nearly brought to extinction in the name of religion, and by means of religious license. One has only to consider the history of the Mission Indians in California... or that of the Pequods in Puritan New England, and the *moral rationale* which could enable a Calvinist divine of the seventeenth century to observe, “thank God that on this day we have sent nearly 600 heathen souls to hell”.

But these are merely the most visible examples in this catalogue of correspondences that pertains to religion and the dehumanization of man; and in spite of their atrocious nature, there are others still more lethal and contagious. There is, for example, that western complexity of ethics which informs the character of Melville’s Col. John Morock, the Indian hater, whose whole identity consists in that dubious

designation. Mordock is himself, Mordock himself, rings false as a stereotype... but the attitudes which motivate him are real and malignant. If we assume, as most of us do perhaps, that there is a positive correlation in the theme of religion and the humanizing of man, we had better admit of serious qualifications. It will behoove us to look on all sides, and to bear in mind that we are ourselves the products of a history that is at best morally ambiguous, in which our experience is informed at the center by an anomalous tension between the human and the inhumane.

Let me tell you a story. One night a strange thing happened. I had written the greater part of The Way to Rainy Mountain; all of it in fact, except the epilogue. I had set down the last of the old Kiowa tales, and I had composed both the historical and the autobiographical commentaries for it. I had the sense of being out of breath, of having said what it was in me to say on that subject. The manuscript lay before me in the bright light, small to be sure, but complete, or nearly so. I had written the second of the two poems in which that book is framed. I had uttered the last word, as it were, and yet a whole penultimate piece seemed to be missing... and I began, again, to write. "During the first hours after midnight," I wrote, "on the morning of November 13, 1883, it seemed that the world was coming to an end. Suddenly the stillness of the night was broken. There were brilliant flashes of light in the sky. Light of such intensity that people were awakened by it. With the speed and density of a driving rain, stars were falling in the universe. Some were brighter than Venus. One was said to be as large as the moon...." I went on to say that that event, the falling of the stars, that explosion of Leonid meteors which occurred one hundred and thirty-nine years ago, is among the earliest entries in the Kiowas calendars. So deeply impressed upon the imagination of the Kiowas is that old phenomenon, that it is remembered still. It had become a part of the racial memory....

The living memory (I wrote) and the verbal tradition which transcends it, were brought together for me, once and for all in the person of Kosan. It seemed imminently right for me to deal, after all, with that old woman Kosan. She is among the most venerable people I have ever known. She spoke and sang to me one summer afternoon in Oklahoma. It was like a dream.

When I was born she was already old. She was a grown woman when my grandparents came into the world. She sat perfectly still, folded over upon herself, and it did not seem possible to me that so many years, a century of years, could be so compacted and distilled. Her voice shuddered, but it did not fail. Her songs were sad. An old whimsy, a delight in language and in remembrance, shown in her one good eye. She conjured up the past, imagining perfectly the long continuity of her being. She imagined the lovely young girl, wild and vital, she had been. She imagined the Sun Dance. This is that she said:

"There was an old, old woman. She had something on her back. The boys went out to see what it was. The old woman had a bag full of earth on her back. It was a certain kind of sandy earth—that is what they must have in the lodge. The dancers must dance upon the sandy earth. The old woman held a digging tool in her hand. She turned toward the south, and pointed with her lips—it was like a kiss—and she began to sing: 'We have brought the earth, now it is time to play. As old as I am, I still have the feeling of play.'"

That was the beginning of the Sun Dance.

Well, by this time, I was back into the book, caught up completely in the act of writing. I had projected myself—imagined myself—out of the room and out of time. I was there with Kosan in the Oklahoma July; we laughed easily together. I felt that I had known her all my life, and indeed all of hers. I did not want to let go of her. But I had come to the end... and I sat down, almost grudgingly, the last sentences.

“It was,” I wrote, “all of this and more—a quest... a going forth upon the way to Rainy Mountain. Probably Kosan too is dead now. At times, in the quiet of evening, I think she must have wondered—dreaming—who she was. Was she become in her sleep that old purveyor of the sacred earth perhaps, that ancient one who, old as she was, still had the feeling of play... and in her mind, at times, did she see the falling stars....?”

For some time I sat looking down at these words on the page, trying to deal with the emptiness that had come about inside of me. The words did not seem real. The longer I looked at them, the more unfamiliar they became. At last I could scarcely believe that they had anything whatsoever to do with meaning.

In desperation, almost, I went back and forth over the final paragraphs—backwards, forwards, hurriedly, (until) my eyes fell upon the name Kosan... and all at once everything seemed suddenly to refer to that name. The name seemed to humanize the whole complexity of language before me. All at once, and absolutely, I had the sense of the magic of words and of names. “KOSAN,” I said. Then it was that that ancient, one-eyed woman Kosan stepped out of the language, and stood before me on the page. I was amazed of course, and yet it seemed to me entirely appropriate that this should happen.

“Yes, grandson,” she said, “What is it? What do you want?”

“I was just now writing about you,” I replied, stammering. “I thought, forgive me, I thought that perhaps you were, that you had...”

“No,” she said, and she cackled, I thought—and (then) she went on. “You have imagined me well, and so I am. You have imagined that I dream, and so I do. I have seen the falling stars...”

“Yes, but all of this, this imagining,” I protested, “this has taken place, is taking place, in my mind. You are not actually here, not here in this room.” It occurred to me that I was being extremely rude, but I couldn’t help myself. Anyway, she seemed to understand.

“Be careful of your pronouncements grandson,” she said. “You imagine that I am here in this room, do you not? That is worth something. You see I have existence, whole being, within your imagination. It is but one kind of being, to be sure, but it is perhaps the best of all kinds. If I am not here in this room grandson, then surely, neither are you.”

“I think I see what you mean,” I said meekly. I felt justly rebuked. “Tell me grandmother, how old are you?”

“Oh, I do not know,” she replied. “There are times when I think that I am the oldest woman on earth. You know the Kiowas came into the world through a hollow log. In my mind’s eye I have seen them emerge one by one, from the mouth of that log. I’ve seen them so clearly—how they were dressed, how delighted they were to see the world around them. I must have been there. And I must have taken part in that old migration of the Kiowas from the Yellowstone to the southern plains, for I have seen



antelope bounding in the tall grass near the Big Horn River. And I've seen the ghost forests of the Black Hills. Once I saw the red cliffs of Paladoro Canyon. I was with those who were camped in the Wichita Mountains when the stars fell...."

"You are indeed very old," I said. "And you have seen many things."

"Yes, I imagine that I have," she replied. Then she turned slowly around, nodding once, and receded into the language I had made. And then I imagined that I was alone in the room.

Who is the storyteller? Of whom is the story told? What is there in the darkness to imagine into being? What is there to dream and to relate? What happens when I, or anyone, exerts the force of language upon the unknown? These are the questions which interest me most. If there is any absolute assumption in back of what I am saying on this occasion, it is this: that we are what we imagine. Our best, our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine who, and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy which can befall us is to go unimagined.

Now let me return to the falling stars, and let me apply a new angle of vision to that old event. Let me proceed this time from a slightly different point of view.

In the winter of 1833, the Kiowas were camped on Elm fork, a branch of the Red River west of the Wichita Mountains. In the preceding summer, they had suffered a massacre at the hands of another tribe, and Tia-me, the sacred Sun Dance doll, and most powerful medicine of the tribe, had been stolen. At no time in the history of their migration from the north, and in the evolution of their plains culture, had the Kiowas been more vulnerable to despair. The loss of Tia-me was a deep psychological wound.

In the early cold of November 13, there occurred over the earth an explosion of meteors. The Kiowas were awakened by the sterile light of falling stars, and they ran out into the false day and were terrified. The year the stars fell is among the earliest entries in the Kiowas calendars and it is indelible in the Kiowas mind. There was symbolic meaning in that November sky. With the coming of natural dawn, there began a new and darker age for the Kiowas people, and the last culture to evolve upon this continent began to decline. Within four years of the falling stars, the Kiowas signed their first treaty with the United States government. Within twenty, four major epidemics of smallpox and Asiatic cholera destroyed more than half their number; and within scarcely more than a generation, their horses were taken from them, and the herds of buffalo were slaughtered and left to waste upon the plains.

*Do you see...* do you, do you see what happens when the imagination is superimposed upon the historical event? It becomes a story. The whole piece becomes more deeply invested with meaning. The terrified Kiowas, when they had regained possession of themselves, did indeed imagine that the falling stars were symbolic of their being and of their destiny. They accounted for themselves with reference to that awful memory—they appropriated it, re-created it, (and) fashioned it into an image of themselves. They imagined it. And by means of that act of the imagination, could they bear what happened to them thereafter. No defeat, no humiliation, no suffering was beyond their power to endure, for none of it was meaningless. They could say to themselves, "Yes, it was all meant to be in its turn." The order of the world was broken, it was clear. Even the stars were shaken loose in the night

sky. The imagination of meaning was not much perhaps, but it was all they had, and it was enough to sustain them.

A writer for whom I have great admiration, Isak Dinesen, said this: "All sorrows can be borne, if you put them into a story, or tell a story about them".

How are we to integrate these things? Within our frame of reference, what is the condition of humanity in the light of anomalous history? How is it predicated upon religious considerations? In a sense, these are exclusive questions. In the context of the American Indian world view, they are scarcely relevant. For they are hypothetical, and abstract. They do not occur to the man who refuses to take a life when he is expecting the gift of life. To the woman who will not be cheated of her grief, and to a wizened elder, who each day of his life paints his face and prays aloud to the rising sun. In these people, there is no separation of religion and humanity, for the one thing is indispensably the other.

I have had some close and personal experience of American Indian religion. When I lived at Hemos Pueblo, as a boy, I entered into the current of life there, and eventually perceived the great spiritual tides that move upon that world, and determine virtually everything within it. I have seen the ancient races which are run at dawn; the descent of men—who are buffalo and deer—from the hills at first light. And the harvest dances in which all the sound and motion of the universe is concentrated in the one dimension of the music and the dance. Once I went with the people of Hemos to plant the caseques fields, and I felt that I had entered into some primordial migration of man through time. I felt of seeds in the earth, and I ate of their yield, and all of it culminated in the profound reality of spiritual fellowship and community. And on that afternoon, it was a community of the whole world.

And years later, when I was grown up, I visited my grandmother for the last time. Together we went to the place where Tia-me is preserved. Tia-me, the Sun Dance fetish of the Kiowas—a doll, as I have heard—(is a) re-presentation of the sun. It was acquired by the Kiowas almost three hundred years ago, in the course of their migration from the headwaters of the Yellowstone River to the southern plains. I had known of this medicine, but I had not understood that it was extant, that it continued to be a vital element in the Kiowa world view long after the Sun Dance, of which it was the central figure, had passed from existence.

After a long preparation, preparation of my mind and spirit, my grandmother, my father and I were ushered into Tia-me's presence. It was suspended, even as in Sun Dance times, from a sacred tree, in the closet of a house in Oklahoma. As I had been instructed, I made an offering to it, a gift of red cloth, a gaily printed yardage that is prized among Kiowa women, and which they use to make the traditional garb of Kiowa matrons—full dress with long flowing sleeves, and an apron-like sash. When I had draped the material over the parflsh in which Tai-me is preserved, my grandmother prayed aloud in Kiowa. She prayed for a long time, while I stood directly before the bundle, and during those moments—which seemed somehow apart from time—I felt as if I had come to the first full spiritual experience of my life. As I wrote of it in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*:

"Once I went with my father and grandmother to see the Tia-me bundle. It was suspended by means of a strip of ticking from the fork of a small ceremonial tree. I made an offering of bright red cloth, and my grandmother prayed aloud. It seemed a long time that we were there. I had

never come into the presence of Tia-me before, nor have I since. There was a great holiness all about in the room, as if an old person had died there, or a child had been born.”

And again, a few years later, I was taken into the membership of the Tiamfe or Gourd Dance society of the Kiowa tribe. And now, at each annual celebration of that society in July, I dance with my kinsmen to the drums and to the ancient songs even as Mamadete did before I was born.

There have been times when I have wondered what the dance is, and what it means, and what I am inside of it. And there have been times when I have known. Always, there comes a moment when the dance takes hold of me... becomes itself the most meaningful and appropriate expression of my existence. And always afterwards there is rejoicing among us—we have made our prayer, and we have made good our humanity in the process. There are lively feelings, there is much good talk and laughter, and there is much that goes without saying.

Here and there, the old people begin to play at words with the young. Telling stories of this and that, of how Saneday came to reside in the moon. And I think of the falling stars, and of Kosan, and of that ancient who, old as she is, still has the feeling of play.

Religion, for the American Indian is a constituent of language and drama, in which man achieves a certain unity with nature, and with the powers which inform the cosmos. (This) duality of language and drama is basically a humanizing equation, I believe. When the Indian exerts his spirit upon the world by means of whole and deliberate religious activity, he transcends himself, in a sense—he expands his awareness to include all of creation—and in this he is restored as a man, and as a race. Nothing in his universe isolates him, but he is part and parcel of all that is and forever was and will be. His humanity consists in concentric forces that are indivisible, and of which he is the absolute and the center. He is the man made of words, he consists in his prayer, and this is his affirmation:

Friends behold, sacred I have been made.

Friends behold, in a sacred manner I have been influenced at the gathering of the clouds.

Sacred I have been made.

Friends behold, sacred I have been made.

Aho.