



NATIVE AMERICAN DRUMS

Drumming is central to Native American spiritual life. Drums and drumming help prepare participants mentally and physically along their spiritual journeys. Many Native Americans believe that the drum helps bring the physical and mental sides of a person into alignment and that drumming brings balance to the participants as they dance and sing to the steady rhythmic beat. Drums and drumming are cornerstones of Native American life. The drum itself is considered sacred.

Native American drums are built on a wooden frame, usually a carved or hollowed-out log, with deer, elk, horse, or buffalo hide stretched across the openings and secured with strips of hide or sinew thongs. Native Americans consider the drum a living, breathing entity that contains the spirits of the trees and animals that contributed to its construction. As such, the drum is to be treated with respect. Each drum has a drum keeper whose job it is to insure that nothing is ever set on the drum; that no one reaches across it; and that people under the influence of alcohol or drugs are kept away from it. The drum keeper is usually the older son of an important family. It is an exceptional honor to be named the keeper of the drum.

WATER DRUMS

A particular type of drum evolved with the establishment of the Native American Church in 1918. This church began in the Southwest among the White Mountain Apaches in the latter part of the 19th century. It is a mixture of Christianity and Indian religious practices. Today it is the most widespread indigenous religion among Native Americans in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The Native American Church holds a cleansing and healing session once a week. A special drum, called a water drum, is central to this ritual. The water drum is a small iron or clay pot with the handles removed. The drum is filled half way with water and then the open end is covered with rawhide. Partially filling the drum produces a special deep sound when it is played. The beating of the drum is continuous throughout the cleansing ceremony. Its rhythmic vibration and special tone are intended to deeply affect the emotions of the participants and increase the power of the ceremony. Beating of the water drum is the only continuous activity during the 24-hour-long session. For the Native American Church, as for Native Americans themselves, drums and drumming are central to a balanced spiritual existence.