

My Family Relationship to Native Ways of Knowing

My family was part of this group that gathered four times each year to honor and respectfully practice Native American traditions under the guidance of Native (Hopi and Paiute) Elders. Let me say here that my parents are white, and I am white. We had no blood relation to Native American lineages, but I think for my parents, Native American ways of knowing made the most sense to them.

These gatherings where we joined the Native American community and practiced their traditions were referred to as “Long Dance.” We would gather in a different spot around Utah each season on or around the Solstice and Equinox, camp there for the weekend, and on Saturday night everyone would stay up all night to dance, drum, and sing together. Over the course of the weekend, we would also participate in building and utilizing sweat lodges under the direction of Paiute Medicine Men. I was very young when my family was participating in this; I think we participated until I was about eight or nine, right before my parents got divorced. These dances were done in a circle, usually outside, except on Winter Solstice, which was inside a cabin in the Wasatch somewhere.

I think an important component in all of this, my parents’ experience and my own, is that we found people from these cultures to guide us, give us advice, and help root us in our studies, so that we weren’t out there doing it all by ourselves and misinterpreting things.

I was always taught to regard plants as sentient beings, and ask their permission before I broke off a sprig or plucked a flower. I was taught to leave a small offering of food for my Spirit, pushing it to the side of my plate at each meal. I was taught about Spirit Keepers, how we each need to acknowledge, care for, and feed our Spirits. I was taught to acknowledge and salute the four directions (North, South, East and West) upon waking up, and before taking a dunk in a river. I was taught how to make a good bed outside without a tent. I was taught sweat lodge and social etiquette, like not crossing the ‘heart line’ and always feeding the elders first. I was taught many songs, mostly sweat lodge songs. Some in English, others not. I was taught ways of drumming and dancing that were intended to communicate with the Spirit.

My family has always had a very close relationship with nature. My grandfather on my mother’s side was a mountain climber, and he froze to death on a mountain when I was in my mother’s womb. He always said that if he died while climbing a mountain, we should feel happy for him because we know he died doing what he loved.

During college I found Samba, and my Samba teacher and mentor, Rosangela Silvestre, who is an indigenous African Brazilian. Many of the concepts in Candomblé (can-dom-blay) and Orixà (O-rish-a) culture felt familiar and comfortable because they overlapped with, or reminded me of, the Native American concepts and culture I had experienced.

I have always said that two things guide me in my work within the Orixà and Samba culture:

- 1) Close contact with my guides and mentors who were born into Samba; those who grew up inside these cultures, and still live them.
- 2) My own personal connection with nature. The Orixà for me are a way of experiencing different facets of myself and how I am tied to nature - it’s about embodying nature through dance.