American Indian spiritual traditions continue to flourish

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When most people think of American Indian spirituality and rituals, they think of the American Southwest or the Great Plains. But there are those who still practice those traditions right here in Louisiana. Among them are members of the Coushatta tribe in Elton.

Although the belief system of all native peoples are similar, there are differences in the way it is expressed from nation to nation, tribe to tribe. "The things that are different are some of the ceremonies they hold, like the sweat lodge ceremony," said Leland Thompson, cultural consultant to the Coushatta tribe. "A lot of people believe sweat lodges refer to all tribes in the United States, but they don't.

Thompson added that although some Coushattas may hold sweat lodges, it's a practice they borrowed from other tribes.

There is one tenet that is universal: Native peoples believe there is only one god. "Because of different languages, the creator's name would be different," said Thompson, who is fluent in the Coushatta language. "For Leland, it's a belief there is one who sits up on high who created everything for us to have in our lives."

The word for God in the Coushatta language is a seven-syllable word that can't be expressed properly in writing, because the language has been passed down only in the oral tradition.

"It translates as 'He Who Has No Death,' " Thompson said.

The old ceremonies are still practiced among the Coushattas, Thompson said. "A lot have become Christians; there are still a few that practice the traditional ways. There are some that do both.

"It's our understanding from a lot of elders, they pointed out a lot of similarities of our beliefs — one creator, one God in Christianity."

Respect is one of the foundations of Coushatta beliefs, Thompson said. "We show a lot of respect to everything in our lives, whether it's good or bad. We see a lot of spirituality in whatever we encounter."

The vision quest is not a standard part of Coushatta tradition, partly because the tribe is far from its original home in Alabama, where all their sacred places were located. "There are a few who do it. It's all in how much they leave themselves open to receive visions. That leaves you open to a whole new world of insight. I guess you would say from the spirit world. I would say, the Creator."

"We seclude ourselves and we pray. Sometimes, it helps to fast."

While outsiders are often fascinated with tribal ceremonies and beliefs, there are some tribes that prefer to keep their rituals private and don't like non-Indians trying to adopt their ways. The attitude can vary from one household to the next, Thompson said.

"There are some that are comfortable with non-Coushattas coming in and asking questions about it, but there are still a few who don't leave themselves open to any outsiders at all."

Thompson said he is not personally averse to sharing some of the traditions. "If somebody respects us well enough to learn our culture and our beliefs and decides to go teach it out there, it helps us to reach out to other people in this country."

It is, however, offensive when outsiders don't get it right, Thompson said. "We've come across people who learn from other Native Americans, but sometimes, they include something out of the ordinary they make up on their own in some way to give it their own flavor. We've come across some outrageous ideas."

Hollywood is often the worst offender; Thompson said. "The movies in reality are just stereotypes and they just pull from these movies what they think is factual and in reality, is not factual."

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