Sacred Earth and Sky: Pre-Columbian Cosmologies of the Osage, Wichita, Hopewell, Mississippian, and Kanza Peoples

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Table of Contents

Preface

This book is a scholarly exploration of the cosmologies and spiritual beliefs of five Indigenous cultures of North America – the **Osage**, **Wichita**, **Hopewell**, **Mississippian**, and **Kanza (Kaw)** – focusing exclusively on their traditions in the **pre-Columbian era** (before European contact). Our purpose is to **document and compare** how each of these peoples understood the cosmos and the sacred, highlighting both their unique traditions and the themes they share. In doing so, we aim to present a culturally respectful synthesis that prioritizes voices and sources from Indigenous communities wherever possible.

Scope and Approach

We concentrate on the **worldviews, creation narratives, deities, rituals, sacred spaces, and symbols** that defined each tradition's cosmology (their theory of the universe's structure) and religious life prior to European influence. Each chapter provides a summary of one nation or culture's belief system, followed by a comparative analysis that draws connections and distinctions across all five. We have included descriptions of **visual elements** – such as cosmological symbols, ceremonial objects, and sacred sites – to help

the reader envision these spiritual landscapes. For example, we describe earthwork mounds aligned to celestial events, sacred bundles, symbolic artwork, and ritual ceremonies, as these tangible elements bring life to the abstract beliefs.

Methodology and Sources

Research for this book draws from a combination of **oral traditions**, **archaeological findings**, and **ethnohistorical accounts**. We have given precedence to **Indigenous-authored and tribally endorsed sources** whenever available, recognizing the importance of Native voices in the interpretation of their own heritage. For the Osage and Kanza, we relied on accounts preserved by tribal historians and 19th-century ethnohistorical recordings (notably by ethnographer J. Owen Dorsey and by Osage scholar Louis F. Burns) that are informed by oral tradition. For the Wichita, we consulted both early 20th-century collections of Wichita mythology and modern information provided by the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes. The Hopewell and Mississippian cultures, which left no written records, are interpreted through archaeological evidence – their earthworks, artifacts, and iconography – supplemented by insights from descendant Indigenous cultures and current Native perspectives on these ancient sites. Because we focus on pre-Columbian times, we do not cover post-contact religious changes (such as the influence of Christianity or new religious movements) except to provide context in the Introduction. [kansasgenealogy.com] [The Wichit…Volume 19], [The Wichit…Volume 19] [wichitatribe.com], [wichitatribe.com] [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Every effort has been made to treat these cosmologies with respect and accuracy. In some cases, details of rituals and beliefs are closely guarded within communities; we have limited our discussion to information that is published or publicly shared by community approval. All factual statements are supported with citations, and a full list of references in **APA style** is provided at the end. We hope this volume serves as a valuable reference for students of religion, anthropology, and history, and – most importantly – honors the rich spiritual heritage of the Osage, Wichita, Hopewell, Mississippian, and Kanza peoples.

Introduction: Historical and Cultural Context

Understanding each tradition's cosmology requires some background on **who these peoples are (or were), where and when they lived, and how their cultures were organized** prior to European contact. This introduction provides a brief overview of the five groups featured in this book, setting the stage for the more detailed explorations that follow.

- **The Osage and Kanza Nations (Dhegiha Siouan Peoples):** The Osage (Wazhá:zhe) and the Kanza (Kaw) are closely related nations belonging to the **Dhegiha branch of the Siouan language family**. In the pre-Columbian era, their ancestors lived in the woodlands and prairies of the central United States. By the 15th century, the Osage and Kanza were semi-sedentary societies in the Great Plains and Ozark Plateau regions, engaging in both agriculture and seasonal hunting. Culturally, they organized into clans and bands, with social structures that often reflected cosmic dualisms (for example, the Osage were traditionally divided into Sky People and Earth People moieties, an echo of their creation story). **Spiritual beliefs** for both centered on a single great mystery power known as *Wakʰóⁿthaa* or *Wakanda*, alongside a pantheon of natural and celestial forces. These beliefs were passed down orally and through ceremonial practices, as neither the Osage nor the Kanza had writing systems. Despite experiencing drastic disruptions after European contact (including forced relocation to reservations in the 19th century), the Osage and Kaw Nations survive today, and they have striven to maintain or revive traditional ceremonies and teachings within their communities. [nps.gov]
- **The Wichita Nation (Caddoan Peoples):** The Wichita (also known by names such as Kitikitish or "the Grass-house People") are an Indigenous people of the Southern Plains. They speak a Caddoan language and are related to groups like the Pawnee and Caddo. Archaeological and oral history evidence traces Wichita ancestry back **over a millennium in the Central and Southern Plains**. Before European contact, the Wichita lived in present-day Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, building distinctive **beehive-shaped grass thatched houses** in village settlements. They farmed corn, beans, and squash along rivers and hunted bison on the plains. By around 1500 CE, large Wichita-affiliated settlements (such as the archaeological sites known as **"council circles"** in Kansas) suggest a complex society that likely hosted regional gatherings. Spiritually, the Wichita had a rich oral mythology and a **"pantheon" of supernatural beings** connected to the sky, weather, and natural world. Early ethnographers recorded Wichita creation stories and rituals in the early 1900s, preserving knowledge of their cosmology just as these practices were waning under colonial pressure. The Wichita and Affiliated Tribes continue today in Oklahoma, preserving cultural heritage and sharing aspects of their traditions publicly (for instance, through exhibits and publications by the Wichita Tribal Council). [wichitatribe.com] [The Wichit...Volume 19]
- **The Hopewell Culture (Middle Woodland Period, Eastern Woodlands):** "Hopewell" is not a tribe or nation but an archaeological culture that thrived from about **100 BCE to 500 CE** in the Eastern Woodlands, particularly in the Ohio River

Valley. The term describes a network of Native societies that shared a distinctive ceremonial life and art style during the Middle Woodland period. These people are often called "Mound Builders" because they constructed monumental **earthwork complexes and mounds** – geometric embankments, conical burial mounds, and effigy shapes – as ceremonial centers. Hopewell sites (like Newark Earthworks and the Hopewell Mound Group in Ohio) show astonishing precision in design and often align with celestial events such as lunar cycles. The Hopewell people lived in dispersed farming-hunting communities but periodically traveled to these ceremonial centers for gatherings and rituals. Though the **original names and languages** of these people are unknown (their descendants might be ancestors of later tribes in the region, such as Algonquian or Siouan speakers), their spiritual legacy is inferred from material remains. Artifacts recovered – including finely crafted platform pipes, mica carvings, copper ornaments, and marine shells – suggest a spiritual system that venerated nature, animal spirits, and the journey of the soul. The extensive trade in sacred materials (obsidian from Yellowstone, copper from the Great Lakes, shells from the Gulf Coast) indicates a far-reaching **"interaction sphere"** likely tied to shared religious ideas. By about 500 CE, the floruit of Hopewell ceremonial construction had ended, but many of their earthworks remained as sacred landscapes that later peoples (and modern archaeologists) would marvel at. Contemporary Native nations such as the Shawnee, Ojibwe, and others have been consulting with researchers to connect these ancient sites to oral histories, bringing Indigenous perspectives to the interpretation of Hopewell spirituality in recent years. [en.wikipedia.org] [nationalpa…aveler.org] [nationalpa…aveler.org], [nationalpa…aveler.org]

- **The Mississippian Culture (Mississippian Period, Southeast and Midwest):** The Mississippian culture (c. **800–1600 CE**) succeeded the Hopewell in parts of the Eastern Woodlands (especially in the Mississippi Valley and Southeast). It is characterized by **large town centers with earthen platform mounds**, maize agriculture, and complex chiefdom-level social organization. Famous Mississippian sites include **Cahokia** in Illinois (near modern St. Louis), **Moundville** in Alabama, **Etowah** in Georgia, and **Spiro** in Oklahoma. At its height (ca. 1100–1300 CE), Cahokia was a city of tens of thousands, featuring the massive Monk's Mound and evidence of formal plazas and wooden solar calendars ("Woodhenges"). The Mississippian spiritual life is partly deciphered through what archaeologists term the **Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC)** – a collection of symbols, motifs, and ceremonial objects found across many Mississippian sites. These include images of birds of prey, serpent-like monsters, warriors with ceremonial regalia, and

mythic figures, often rendered on copper plates, shell gorgets, pottery, and stone. The consistency of these icons across great distances suggests a widely shared cosmology and ritual system supporting chiefly authority. Early historic records from the 16th and 17th centuries (from Spanish and French explorers) provide additional insight into Mississippian descendant societies – for example, the Natchez people observed in the 1700s had a "Great Sun" chief and practiced elaborate funeral sacrifices, hinting at sun worship and royal ancestor veneration. By linking archaeological evidence with such accounts and later oral traditions of Southeastern tribes (Choctaw, Muscogee Creek, Cherokee, etc.), scholars have reconstructed key elements of the Mississippian **cosmic worldview**: a universe of layered realms (Above, Middle, Below) and powerful deities or spirits inhabiting each. Although the Mississippian civilization itself declined before and during early European colonization (due to factors like population shifts, resource stress, and disease), elements of its cosmology survived in the religions of descendant tribal nations into the historic era. [en.wikipedia.org]

Each of the following chapters delves into one of these cultures, describing in detail how they viewed the creation of the world, the gods or spirits that guided it, the sacred ceremonies that sustained cosmic order, and the symbols through which they communicated spiritual truths. By studying these rich cosmologies side by side, we gain a deeper appreciation for the intellectual and spiritual achievements of Indigenous America long before Columbus's contact.

Chapter 1: Osage Nation – Cosmology and Spiritual Beliefs

"Children of the Middle Waters." The Osage people refer to themselves as the **Ni-U-Ko'nskã**, meaning *Children of the Middle Waters*, which already hints at the cosmic significance their traditions place on balance and connection. Osage spirituality is profoundly rooted in the idea of a **unifying sacred force** and the marriage of cosmic opposites. Traditional Osage religion is often described as **pantheistic or animistic**, with all forms of life and elements of the universe understood as part of one great encompassing mystery, *Wah'Kon-Tah* (also rendered as *Wakonda* or *Wakąda*). Wah'Kon-Tah is not a god in a narrow sense, but rather the fundamental **mysterious power that animates the cosmos** and pervades all existence. Early missionaries and anthropologists struggled to translate this, often using terms like "Great Spirit" or "Great Mystery." Every being – from the mightiest star to the smallest plant – is seen as a manifestation of Wah'Kon-Tah's life force, and thus **sacred and interconnected**. [nps.gov]

Creation Narrative and Cosmic Structure

The Osage **creation story** is a central pillar of their cosmology, explaining how harmony was established between the heavens and the earth. In one commonly cited version, the Osage people originated in the sky: they were called the **People of the Sky** (*Tzi-sho*) and lived in the celestial realm without knowing their ultimate origins. Driven by curiosity, they journeyed first to the Sun, who revealed himself as their father, and then to the Moon, who revealed herself as their mother. The Sun and Moon instructed the Osage that they must leave the sky and **go down to live on Earth**. Obeying this divine command, the people descended – but they found the Earth covered entirely by water, an endless flood with no land in sight. Stranded between sky and sea, the people prayed to the animal spirits for aid. [nps.gov] [indianrese...ation.info]

In answer, **Elk** – a revered animal spirit known for strength and wisdom – dove into the primordial waters. Elk called forth the winds from each of the four directions, causing powerful breaths of air to blow across the waters. The winds churned the waters, and slowly **dry land emerged**: first bare rocks, then, as Elk's hair fell out and touched the ground, it miraculously turned into plants – grasses, trees, and the staple crops that would feed mankind (such as corn and wild potatoes). Thus, through the *intercession of animal powers* and the *union of wind and water*, Earth became habitable. The Osage people settled on this newly formed land and, in their wanderings, encountered other human beings with whom they joined to form one nation. This story emphasizes key Osage themes: **celestial ancestry**, **the essential role of animal spirits** (here Elk) in creation, and the idea that humans are meant to live "in the middle," between sky and earth, balancing both. [indianrese...ation.info]

From this narrative comes an understanding of the **cosmos as a layered reality**. There is the **Sky World**, home of powerful celestial beings (Sun, Moon, stars); the **Earth (Middle) World**, where humans, animals, and plants dwell; and an **Underwater World** beneath, often associated with chaos or danger. The Osage recognized the dynamic interplay between these realms. Notably, their very tribal organization mirrored it: traditionally, the Osage were divided into two great divisions or moieties – the *Tzi-sho* (Sky People) and the *Hun-kah* (Earth People) – who had complementary ceremonial roles. Marriages were often arranged between the two, ritually uniting Sky and Earth lineages. In ceremonies, each side would fulfill specific duties to ensure cosmic balance. This social structure, **"as above, so below,"** reflects a belief that *harmony in the tribe and harmony in the universe are intertwined*. [nps.gov]

Another facet of Osage cosmology is the enumeration of certain primary sacred powers sometimes called the "**Seven Wakandas**." According to 19th-century accounts, the Osage

(and closely related Kanza) spoke of seven great manifestations of Wakanda: **Darkness, the Upper World (sky), the Earth (ground), the Thunder-being, the Sun, the Moon, and the Morning Star**. Among these, the "Upper World" (overall sky realm) was often regarded as the highest principle. This list encapsulates key elements of their cosmos – including celestial bodies and weather forces – personified as sacred forces. For example, **Thunder (Thunder-being)** is envisioned as a spirit or deity (analogous to a Thunder Bird) that brings storms, rain, and lightning; many Plains tribes, Osage included, venerated Thunder for its life-giving rain and feared it for its destructive power. **Morning Star** appears as another important figure, hinting at links to wider plains and woodland star traditions (Morning Star is prominent also in Wichita and Pawnee lore, as we'll see). The inclusion of Darkness as a Wakanda underscores that even the abstract concept of night or the void was deified – a recognition of night as a primordial condition or entity. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Deities, Spirits, and Sacred Forces

While Wah'Kon-Tah is the all-encompassing mystery, the Osage recognize many specific **spirits (Wakanda) or sacred beings** within creation. Aside from the "seven" mentioned above, there are spirits of animals, plants, waters, stars, and so forth. The Osage, like many Siouan peoples, believed that powerful spirit beings existed in natural features such as **springs, caves, and celestial bodies**, and these could be called upon for help or guidance. In Osage and related Dhegiha Siouan languages, the word *Wakʰóⁿ* (sacred/mysterious) gets applied widely: certain animals might be considered *wakʰóⁿ* for their special powers; a medicine bundle or a ritual song can be *wakʰóⁿ*. Everything is imbued with spiritual essence, but some entities are especially potent and treated with reverence.

Sun and Moon: The Sun was often addressed in prayer as "Grandfather" and called "the mysterious one of day". Osage people would salute the rising sun each morning, offering smoke or prayer to it regardless of the sun's position. The Sun's daily journey was seen as vital to life's order, and as the creation story suggests, the Sun was viewed as an ancestor of the people (their father in the sky). The Moon, correspondingly, could be addressed as "Grandmother." Lunar phases and cycles subtly influenced certain ritual timings, though sun worship was more pronounced. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Stars: The Osage have traditional names and significance for many stars and constellations. The account by Francis La Flesche (an Omaha ethnologist who worked with Osage advisors) notes that the **Pleiades**, **Orion's Belt** (which Osage called "Three Deer"), the **Big Dipper** ("the Bowl"), and a certain "Little Star" were all regarded as *Wakanda* (spirit powers) in Osage astronomy. They, too, were called "Grandfather" in prayers, indicating familial respect. Stars were often consulted as seasonal markers (for planting, hunting

seasons, etc.) and woven into myths. For example, one Osage story tells of how the Morning Star (a male principal) and Evening Star (female) have roles in creation and the origin of people – a theme more elaborated in Caddoan/Pawnee traditions but echoed among the Osage. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Thunder Beings: Thunder and lightning were believed to be caused by **Thunder Beings**, often conceptualized as giant mystical birds (analogous to the Thunderbirds of other tribal lore) flying in the above realm, flapping their wings to create thunderclaps and shooting lightning from their eyes. Osage singers invoked Thunder Beings in war ceremonies and rain-making rites. Thunder Beings were respected as agents of Wakanda that could bring fertility (rain for crops) or punishment. Osage tradition also speaks of **water monsters** in the rivers – huge horned serpents or dragons called *Wakʰóⁿda-ge* (literally "water Wakanda"), which lived under river bluffs. These creatures represent the **underworld forces** of water, chaos, and danger, balancing the Thunderbirds of the sky (this mirrors the widespread Plains/Southeastern motif of Thunderbirds vs. Underwater Serpents, symbolizing the balance of sky and water). Osage hero stories sometimes feature warriors confronting these underwater monsters, symbolically maintaining balance between above and below. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Rituals and Ceremonial Life

Every aspect of traditional Osage life carried spiritual significance. **Prayer and offerings** were routine parts of daily and communal activities. An Osage person might pray to Wakanda spontaneously whenever in need, or give thanks when success occurred – there was no strict schedule, as *"there was no set form of worship of Wakanda"*, but rather a pervasive attitude that **Wakanda is always listening** to sincere prayers. People believed Wakanda or the spirits could hear petitions anywhere, so even simple gestures counted as acts of reverence. Some common forms of prayer or propitiation included: **lifting the arms to the sky, offering the smoke of tobacco, casting a pinch of cedar into a fire, or even cutting one's flesh** as a sacrifice in extreme cases. For example, burning *cedar* was especially sacred – cedar smoke was purifying and pleasing to Wakanda. In the sweat lodge ceremony (a purification rite), cedar needles would be burned, and songs sung to ask for mercy or guidance. [kansasgenealogy.com]

One vivid description involves the use of **cedar and water in an initiation rite**. When Osage women were admitted to certain secret societies or ceremonies, the officiants would give the initiate *four sips of water* (symbolizing the river by the Tree of Life in their lore) and rub cedar needles over her body while invoking Wakanda's name. The cedar tree was a symbol of the *axis mundi* or Tree of Life in Osage cosmology – connecting earth and sky – so this ritual essentially bathed the person in the life-giving essence of Wakanda's

creation. Twelve passes with the cedar (three on each side of the body, front and back) corresponded to sacred numbers and reiterated the blessing of the *Tree of Life* and flowing water. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Ceremonial Pipes: Like many Plains cultures, the Osage held the smoking of tobacco in a pipe to be a sacred act. The pipe (often a calumet) was a means to communicate prayers – the rising smoke carried messages to the heavens. In formal councils or rituals, an Osage pipe might be raised and pointed to the sky (honoring the sky powers), then to the earth, and the four directions, before being passed. The quote *"Here is tobacco! I wish to follow your course,"* from an Osage prayer addresses the Sun this way, symbolically feeding the Sun spirit with tobacco smoke and asking for guidance and long life in return. Every major event – whether planting, hunting, treaty-making, or naming a child – could involve pipe offerings or other sacred observances, reflecting the belief that **no action was separate from spiritual context**. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Life-Cycle Ceremonies: The Osage celebrated or marked key life events (birth, naming, puberty, marriage, etc.) with prayerful rituals. For instance, naming a child might involve an elder using **sacred water and cedar**, as described above, and bestowing a name that connected the child to nature or ancestors. At puberty, vision quests (isolating oneself in nature to fast and pray for a guardian vision) were more common for young men, guided by elders, connecting the youth with a personal spirit ally like an eagle, bear, or other creature.

Communal Ceremonies: The tribe also held large ceremonies, some of which were seasonal. Ethnographers have noted Osage ceremonies such as the **Harvest Feast** and the **Hunting Feast**, which gave thanks for the corn crop or for a successful autumn hunt, respectively, paralleling the agricultural and hunting cycle. There was also the important **Warriors' Dance** (a ritual before war parties) and a **Peacemaking Ceremony** for when tribes agreed to cease hostilities. In the 19th century, the Osage, like many Plains tribes, adopted the **Ghost Dance** and later the Peyote Road (Native American Church), but those developments fall outside our pre-Columbian scope.

One particularly intricate ceremonial complex of the Osage is sometimes called the **Wa.xóbe (sacred bundle) ceremonies**. The Osage possessed sacred bundles – collections of holy objects wrapped in otter skin or cloth – that were handed down through clans or societies, each bundle with specific songs and rites to activate its power. These bundles often had origin stories linking them to the gods or heroes. When the Osage performed a **ceremonial dance or song cycle**, the bundle might be opened and displayed, and specific symbols (like an eagle feather or a carved figure) would be set out. The ceremony could last for days and involved a precise sequence of chants that retell cosmic myths, ensuring the community's **cosmic harmony and well-being**. Unfortunately, much

of the detail of Osage bundle rites is esoteric and not published openly, but what is clear is that **storytelling, song, and dance** were vehicles for renewing the relationship between the people and Wah'Kon-Tah.

Sacred Geography and Symbols

The **Osage ancestral lands** between the Missouri and Arkansas rivers contained many places imbued with sanctity. High bluffs, springs, and confluences of rivers were often regarded as **sacred sites** where one might leave offerings. The Osage saw their entire environment as spiritually alive – for example, they referred to **the Mississippi/Missouri river system as Ni-U-Ko'nskã, the "Middle Waters,"** which in mythic terms meant the central flow of life connecting worlds (hence their autonym).

Important **symbols** in Osage art and ritual included the **morning star emblem**, the **crescent (for moon)**, and the **cedar tree**. Even their traditional dress and body painting reflected cosmology: Osage warriors were known to paint one half of their body red and the other half black or dark, said to represent day and night or sky and earth coming together. This was not merely decorative but an **embodiment of their dualistic worldview** during rituals or war preparation.

In summary, the Osage cosmology is a tapestry where **everything is related**: the sky and earth married to give birth to the people; the people must honor both realms in every act. **Wah'Kon-Tah,** as the Great Mystery, underpins a reverence for all life. The Osage sought to live in accordance with the principles established in the creation time – maintaining balance between cosmic forces, giving thanks to the Sun, Moon, stars, and elements, and respecting the animal and plant nations as elder spirits. As one Osage prayer concludes: *"Throughout this island (the world) you [the Sun] regulate everything that moves… Therefore, O Mysterious Power, I ask a favor of you."* Such prayers capture the Osage understanding of humans' humble but hopeful place in the grand cosmic order regulated by Wakanda. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Chapter 2: Wichita Nation – Cosmology and Spiritual Beliefs

The **Wichita** people of the Great Plains (self-name *Kitikiti'sh*, meaning "raccoon-eyed people," a reference to their distinctive tattoo around the eyes) have a spiritual tradition rich in **cosmic imagery, cyclic time, and agricultural mythology**. As part of the Caddoan language family, the Wichita are kin to tribes like the Pawnee, and indeed, there are notable parallels between Wichita and Pawnee cosmology (such as an emphasis on star deities). However, the Wichita developed their own unique ceremonial life adapted to their homeland in what is now Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Prior to significant European

influence (say, before 1700 CE), Wichita spirituality was preserved through oral narratives (myths, sacred stories), elaborate annual ceremonies, and daily practices that honored the supernatural.

The Sacred Narrative Cycle and World Origins

Wichita oral tradition conveys that the **history of the world moves in cycles**: creation, flourishing, decline, and renewal. One summary from Wichita tribal historians states, *"Wichita legends tell us that the history of our people forms a cycle… The cycle is complete with the days of darkness, when the earth becomes barren. Just as disaster seems imminent, the cycle begins again, and the world is renewed through the new creation."*. This cyclical worldview is key – rather than a single beginning and end, the cosmos goes through periodic rebirths. It implies that time itself is sacred and repetitive; rituals likely helped ensure the renewal phase would come again. [wichitatribe.com]

In Wichita cosmology, **creation began with a divine gift from celestial beings**. A prominent myth recounts how, after the first man and woman were formed, they had a dream in which gifts for humanity were revealed to them by the spirits. Upon awakening, they found those gifts made real. Among these gifts was the ear of **corn** (maize), given to the woman, with the instruction that *"It was to be the food of the people… to be used generation after generation."*. Corn thus holds a sanctified place as a life-sustaining gift from the Creator, and this story positions **a woman as the first keeper of corn** – highlighting the importance of women in agriculture and spiritual continuity. Likewise, the first man was given the **bow and arrow** in the dream, representing the gifts of sustenance through hunting and tools for survival. Right from the start, then, Wichita cosmology sacralizes the fundamental means of living (farming and hunting) as divine endowments. [wichitatribe.com]

The Wichita pantheon is complex and **star-centered**. In myth, the primal spirits often take the form of cosmic bodies: for example, **Morning Star and the Moon** are said to be the spirits of the first man and first woman. In one tale recorded in the early 20th century, **Morning Star** (sometimes conceived as male) and **Moon** (female) received instructions from the supreme Creator to shape human destiny and bestow vital knowledge. Morning Star and Moon, in some accounts, are husband and wife – together they complete the cycle of night into dawn. The Wichita thus have a husband-wife pair of deities analogous to sky father and earth or moon mother figures found in many cultures. [wichitatribe.com]

According to ethnographer George A. Dorsey's compilation *"Mythology of the Wichita"* (1904), the Wichita recognize a **Supreme Creator figure called *Kinshi'us* (or *Kinnikasus*)**. Kinnikasus is translated as "Man Never Known on Earth" or "Man Never Seen", essentially

the great spirit beyond human comprehension (much like the concept of **Tirawa** among the Pawnee). This Creator made the first humans and all things on earth. Wichita prayers invoke many spirits but invariably include Kinnikasus as the ultimate **"Spirit Over All"**. It is notable that in Wichita theology, the sky is richly populated with figures: besides Kinnikasus (the remote Creator), there is the **Morning Star (the spirit of the first man)**, the **Moon (Bright Shining Woman, the first woman and "mother of the universe")**, the **Sun** (considered an important spirit, though somewhat enigmatic in Wichita belief, referred to as "Man Reflecting Light"), and various star beings like the **South Star** and **North Star** with special roles. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

For example, the **Moon goddess (Bright Shining Woman)** holds great influence: being the first woman, wife of Morning Star, she is said to control all things related to **fertility and procreation** – human birth, the propagation of animals, and the growth of crops. Women would pray to the Moon for safe childbirth and healthy children, holding their newborns up to the moonlight as an offering and blessing. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

The **Morning Star** in Wichita lore is associated with **light and the dawn**, and is often seen as a **teacher or culture hero**. One account describes Morning Star as the spirit of the first man who became a prophet to the people, teaching them rituals and guiding them, and who is remembered in prayers. Interestingly, the Wichita also speak of the Morning Star carrying light (his name was paraphrased as "Having Power To Carry Light"), a beautiful image of Venus (the morning star) as a torch-bearer in the sky. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Earth and Nature Spirits: The Wichita conceive of **Earth as a Mother** figure as well – often referred to simply as **Earth Mother**, who gave birth to mankind (there's an echo of this in the Genesis story where humans were created from clay or soil after the earth was prepared). Earth Mother, along with the **Water Spirit (often personified as a female called "Woman Forever in the Water")**, are key deity. The Water Spirit enabled growth and continuation of life – Wichita mothers offered prayers to the Water Spirit after childbirth, thanking her for sustaining the child and asking for abundant milk and health. Water Spirit also had a moral guardianship role: women whose husbands were away would bathe in the river and pray to the Water Spirit to **protect their virtue and safety** in their husbands' absence, a touching insight into how spirituality wove into everyday concerns like marital fidelity and well-being. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

The Wichita acknowledge the **Four Directions and winds** as life-giving powers too, though interestingly, they don't emphasize the four cardinal winds as explicitly as some other Plains tribes; instead, specific stars (South Star, North Star) fulfill some protective functions that other cultures assign to guardian winds. For instance, the **South Star** was believed to **guard men** (granting vigor to warriors and ensuring the birth of male children),

whereas the **North Star** – called "The Light Which Stands Still" – was a more ambivalent force associated with both death and healing. The North Star's stillness and unchanging position in the sky made it a symbol of something to be respected and somewhat feared; medicine men would invoke the North Star in healing rituals, perhaps to ask it to **withhold death** (i.e., not draw the patient's soul away). [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Beyond the sky and water deities, **animal spirits** appear throughout Wichita cosmology. In myths, often an **animal will transform or reveal itself as a benefactor**. For example, legends mention **Bear, Buffalo, Deer, and even mythic creatures** playing roles in teaching songs or rites to humans. These are not seen as gods on the level of the sky beings but rather as **personal guardian spirits or helpers**. Wichita individuals often sought visions or dreams where an animal spirit would give them special knowledge or power (this is a pan-Plains trait – the vision quest). The animal powers could grant success in hunting, healing skills, or protection. However, Wichita understanding kept a distinction: an animal spirit is a different category than the high sky gods like Morning Star or Kinnikasus; they are more **localized or specific powers** that might attach to an individual or a society (like a medicine society devoted to the Buffalo could have Buffalo as a patron).

Religious Practices and Ceremonies

The Wichita, being a settled agricultural people, had a ceremonial cycle closely tied to **seasons and subsistence activities**. Key rituals revolved around planting, first fruits (harvest), and hunting periods. One of the major ceremonies of the Wichita was the **Deer Dance (Tia)**, noted by early ethnographers as an important gathering where members of all the various dance societies could participate. The Deer Dance likely had mythic roots – perhaps reenacting a story of a culture hero or a spirit being in deer form – and was a community-wide celebration. The mention of "all societies were welcome to dance and show their powers" suggests that this event was a chance for those who had received different spiritual powers (through dreams or clan traditions) to publicly display them in a harmonious way. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Another ceremony called the **Doctor Dance (Hádes)** was a gathering of medicine men and their apprentices. This was possibly a healing ceremony or a ritual demonstration of supernatural feats (since it's noted that medicine doctors would appear, perhaps showing their prowess, such as blowing fire or performing symbolic surgeries, as seen in some Plains medicine lodge ceremonies). The Wichita had **war dances** and **scalp dances** as well, common on the Plains — used to prepare for battle or celebrate victory. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Uniquely, the Wichita had an elaborate ritual for **building their grass-thatched lodges**, which was **steeped in cosmological meaning**. The construction of a family house or, especially, the large ceremonial lodge was guided by spiritual instructions passed down in legends. For example, there were dictates on exactly where to place the door (often doors faced **east** to greet the rising sun, symbolically inviting the Sun's blessings each day). The process of erecting the house frame was accompanied by prayers and the recitation of how the knowledge of house-building was originally received from the spirits. The legend of the **Deer Dance** is said to include the instructions for building the ceremonial lodge. This means that myth and practice were tightly interwoven: when Wichita people built a lodge, they were reenacting the archetypal construction taught by divine figures at the beginning of time, thus renewing the world's order. The use of **four** or **seven** in structural elements (such as four main posts or seven hoops) was likely symbolic, reflecting sacred numbers that appear in myths (four directions, etc.). [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Sacred objects also featured in Wichita ceremonies. In the old days, they made **bundles of medicine** with items like stones, animal skins, and whistles or pipes, each associated with a legend of how it was obtained from a spirit. These bundles were cared for by specific individuals (keepers) and brought out during appropriate times – for example, a bundle might be opened when praying for rain or during a naming ceremony.

One prominent ritual documented is the **naming and water blessing of infants**: the day after a child was born, an elderly woman would perform a rite at dawn, carrying the baby to a stream, and dipping the child in water while praying to **Bright Shining Woman (the Moon)**, **the Water Spirit**, and **Kinnikasus** for the child's good health and long life. She would invoke the Moon as the giver of life and the water as purifying, essentially baptizing the newborn into the spiritual community of the tribe. This shows how even domestic events like childbirth were imbued with cosmic significance – the infant is introduced to the primary female deities (Moon and Water) immediately, underscoring that life itself is a gift of these forces. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

The Wichita, much like their Pawnee relatives, likely had ceremonies tied to the **heliacal rising of certain stars** or to the **summer solstice**, although direct records are scant. However, given that the Pawnee famously conducted a Morning Star sacrifice in spring when Venus rose before dawn, we might suspect the Wichita had rites timed with Venus or other stars (the mention that Morning Star and Moon bestowed corn suggests a story possibly tied to planting season and Venus's appearance).

Another key part of Wichita spirituality was their practice of **tattooing**, which had not just aesthetic but ritual importance. Wichita women were extensively tattooed with complex designs (circles, lines, and triangles across face and body). Men, too, tattooed with war

honors and protective symbols. These tattoos often had **spiritual meanings or were said to be given by spirits** in the mythic past. For instance, the full-body tattoo design on Wichita women was said to be originally taught by the Buffalo spirit, and the concentric circles around a woman's breasts were to ensure long life and symbolize the cosmic circles. Thus, the very bodies of the Wichita became **living canvases of their cosmology** – a woman's tattoo could tie her to the buffalo (for abundance and health), and the raccoon-eye tattoo around the eyes (circles) could denote clear vision and identity as Wichita (hence the French nickname *Pani Piqué*, "Tattooed Pawnee," for them). [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Moral and Philosophical Aspects: Wichita religious stories often carried moral lessons, much as their Plains neighbors did. They believed that spirits monitored human thoughts and behavior. Evil thoughts or breaking a taboo would bring misfortune, while good intentions would be rewarded. For example, one legend cited by Dorsey is of a young woman who traveled to the Moon (the "Girl in the Moon" story), which teaches that disobeying spiritual instruction leads to dire consequences. They emphasized sincerity and humility in conducting any spiritual power – boasting of a power could cause it to be revoked by the donor spirit. These teachings were part of the narratives often told during winter or at ceremonies, instilling a worldview that **one must live in accordance with spiritual law**: be truthful, brave, modest, and generous. [The Wichit...Volume 19], [The Wichit...Volume 19] [The Wichit...Volume 19]

The Wichita also had a concept of the **afterlife**: they believed in a **"spirit land" in the sky** where souls go after death. This land was thought to be a mirror of earthly happiness, free from pain. It was located among or beyond the stars. A curious detail is that they held a belief that **suicide barred one from entering the spirit land fully** – such souls would linger near the sky but not be admitted, a sign of spiritual disapproval of taking one's own life. Proper funerary practices, like placing the body in an elevated place and special prayers by elders (often to Mother Earth and Kinnikasus), were done to ensure safe travel of the soul. Burial offerings and rituals (e.g., relatives bathing in the river for four days after a death to cleanse grief) indicate that maintaining harmony with the spirits, even in mourning, was crucial. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Sacred Spaces and Astronomy

Though the Wichita did not build massive mounds, they left their mark on the landscape. The recent discovery of large **circular earthworks in Kansas (council circles)** reveals that around 1450 CE, ancestral Wichita people constructed enormous circles of earth with precise geometries and evidence of ceremonial posts aligned possibly to solstices. For example, at one such site, a pair of parallel earthen walls ran exactly east-west towards the

sunset of the winter solstice, and gaps in the circle's wall aligned with an 18.6-year lunar cycle. These findings strongly suggest that, like their Woodland and Mississippian predecessors, the Wichita had **astronomical knowledge and built ceremonial spaces to reflect the cosmos**. A 164-foot wide circle found (likely a ceremonial council space) might have been the venue for seasonal ceremonies that gathered multiple Wichita bands. It underscores that even on the Plains, where resources for building were scarce, the people organized space to sanctify it – the open sky itself was their temple ceiling, and the medicine lodge or council circle was built in harmony with that sky. [nationalpa…aveler.org], [nationalpa…aveler.org] [nationalpa…aveler.org]

In everyday village life, the **central plaza** of a Wichita village was a communal sacred area as well. It was typically where dances and feasts occurred. One report from Spanish explorers (Coronado's expedition in 1541) describes Wichita (Quiviran) villages where **altars or sacred objects** might have been erected in the center for ceremonies.

Fire was another sacred element – the Wichita kept a central fire during important rites, perhaps symbolizing the sun or sacred fire from the beginning of the world (a common theme among many tribes is that during ceremonies, the fire is never allowed to die out as it represents continuity of life).

In summary, the Wichita cosmology can be seen as a grand **synthesis of celestial and terrestrial**. **Above**, they revere a host of star and sky beings: an Almighty Creator (Kinnikasus), Sun, Moon, Morning Star, and the directional stars, who set the cosmos in motion and continue to influence fate. **Below**, they honor Earth, water, and the animal spirits that sustain daily life. Through **ceremonies like the Deer Dance and sacred lodge-building**, they enact the stories of how culture heroes and deities taught them to live. Through **everyday piety** – morning prayers to the sun, offerings of corn or tobacco, caring for sacred corn seeds – they maintain a relationship with the forces that gifted them agriculture and life. The Wichita view the universe as alive with persons in the sky and earth (not human persons, but personified powers) and see themselves as participants in a cyclical story that is much larger than any individual lifespan. Each generation passes on the sacred stories and keeps the cycle moving, from creation to renewal once more. [wichitatribe.com]

Chapter 3: Hopewell Culture – Cosmology and Spiritual Beliefs

The **Hopewell culture** (c. 100 BCE – 500 CE) offers a fascinating window into ancient North American spirituality through the lens of archaeology. Since the people we call "Hopewell" left no written records and their descendant lineages are not directly known, our

understanding of their cosmology is necessarily reconstructed from their **earthworks, artifacts, and burial practices**. What emerges is the picture of a society that created an elaborate **"sacred landscape"** across parts of Ohio, Illinois, and neighboring regions, and whose spiritual life was sophisticated enough to coordinate large-scale constructions aligned with celestial events and to sustain far-flung exchange networks for ritual materials. [nationalpa…aveler.org] [en.wikipedia.org]

Mound Building and Sacred Earth

The most eye-catching evidence of Hopewell spiritual beliefs lies in the **monumental earthworks** they built. Dozens of ceremonial centers in Ohio – such as the Newark Earthworks, the Hopewell Mound Group, Mound City, Seip Earthworks, and High Bank Works – consist of monumental geometric enclosures (circles, squares, octagons) and earthen mounds, some aligned to astronomical phenomena. The scale and precision of these constructions indicate communal rituals of impressive social organization and cosmological knowledge. For instance, the **Newark Earthworks** include a giant octagonal enclosure connected to a circular enclosure by parallel walls, which researchers have shown aligns with the complex 18.6-year cycle of the moon's rising and setting points on the horizon. Only a culture with careful observation of the skies over generations could incorporate such alignments into architecture, implying **astronomer-priests or knowledge keepers** as part of their society. Aligning massive earth structures with the lunar cycle or solstices (as Newark and other sites do) suggests that **celestial events had sacred significance**, likely timing major ceremonies for the Hopewell people. [en.wikipedia.org]

The **layout of earthworks** often combines different shapes in specific ratios; for example, a perfectly formed circle might connect to a square, and the circle's diameter might equal the square's side length (as seen at sites like Oktagon and Hopeton). Such geometry could symbolize cosmic order – perhaps the circle representing the heavens or the infinite, and the square representing the earth or the four directions. The alignments to solstice sunset or lunar standstills at certain gateways suggest that participants at these sites may have gathered to witness these astronomical events as part of ritual, **celebrating the turning of the seasons or the majesty of the moon**, integrating sky phenomena into religious practice. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

There is evidence that these **earthwork complexes served as ceremonial pilgrimage centers** rather than habitation sites. At Hopewell Culture National Historical Park in Ohio, for example, archaeologists note almost no signs of people living inside the earthworks; instead, the enclosures encircle ritual spaces where hundreds of people from different groups would gather temporarily. During these gatherings (which might coincide with

eclipses, solstices, equinoxes, or funerary events), participants likely engaged in **ritual dramas, feasts, and the construction of mounds to bury offerings and the deceased**. One can imagine torchlight ceremonies under the stars, processions through the parallel-walled avenues, and perhaps **chanting or music** resonating within those geometric embankments. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Mounds as Cosmic Models: The Hopewell built two main types of mounds: conical mounds used for burials or cremation deposits, and effigy mounds (though effigy mounds are more a Late Woodland trait, the famous Serpent Mound in Ohio – often associated with Adena or Fort Ancient cultures – indicates a continuity of earth effigy tradition). At Mound City (a Hopewell site in Ohio), 25 mounds were enclosed by a circular earthen wall. Underneath each mound, excavations revealed the remains of a **charnel house** or ritual structure where bodies were cremated and grave goods deposited. After use, the structure was burned or dismantled, and earth was heaped on top, forming the mound. The act of mound-building over the dead was likely a **ritual of cosmic renewal** – by elevating the deceased (and often richly accompanying them with exotic goods), the Hopewell may have believed they were sending these individuals and offerings to the **spirit world above**. Indeed, some archaeologists, like Dr. Christopher Carr, interpret certain burial arrangements as reenacting a **"death journey"**: artifacts like bird effigy motifs or mica cutouts of human forms with upraised arms could symbolize the soul's flight to the Upper Realm. [nationalpa…aveler.org] [christophe…eology.com]

In Hopewell sites, one finds an emphasis on dualities and cardinal directions as well. Burials were sometimes oriented in specific ways, and there's evidence that **ritual fires were lit at the center of mounds** (perhaps representing the sun or a hearth of creation). Some mounds contain deposits of colored earth (red ochre, yellow sand, white ash) which could have symbolic color associations (for example, red = life or blood, white = death or bones, black = night or ancestors).

Artifacts and Iconography: Clues to Belief

Hopewell art is world-renowned for its beauty and symbolism. Many artifacts from Hopewell contexts have clear religious or shamanic connotations:

- **Animal Effigy Pipes:** The Hopewell people carved spectacular stone platform pipes portraying animals – bear, wolf, beaver, birds, fish, and seemingly even mythical creatures – with lifelike detail. These pipes were likely used in ceremonial smoking rituals, perhaps to send prayers via tobacco smoke to the spirit of the effigy animal depicted. By smoking through a pipe shaped like a heron or otter, for example, a shaman might invite that animal's spirit to assist in healing or mediating with the

otherworld. Over 200 such pipes were found in a single deposit known as the "Mound of Pipes", suggesting a communal ritual where each pipe might have been contributed by a different clan or group, then all ritually retired together. The animals chosen often have symbolic meaning: for instance, **birds** (especially raptors) connect to the sky, **water creatures** (otters, fish) connect to the underworld waters, and **predators** (bear, wolf) connect to strength and perhaps clan totems. The act of smoking itself was likely a form of purification and communication with the divine, much as it was in historic tribes. [en.wikipedia.org], [en.wikipedia.org] [en.wikipedia.org]

- **Copper and Mica Artifacts:** Hopewell artisans obtained native copper (mostly from the Lake Superior region) and hammered it into thin sheets to create **silhouettes and embossed ornaments**. Common motifs in these copper cutouts include birds (like raptors or perhaps the mythical Thunderbirds), stylized human forms, claw shapes, and geometric designs. One famous example is a copper **effigy of a *bird of prey* with spread wings**, possibly worn as a headdress or chest ornament by a ritual dancer. As birds of prey often symbolize a link to the sky realm, such an ornament might indicate a priest or shaman taking on the role of a sky messenger during ceremonies. Mica, a reflective mineral, was imported from the Appalachians and carved into delicate shapes such as the notable **"mica hand"** – an 11-inch hand-shaped cutout of mica. This mica hand might have represented a **human hand with an eye in the palm**, a symbol later seen in Mississippian iconography as well, possibly signifying the portal to the spirit world or the hand of a deity. Mica's mirror-like quality likely gave it a magical association with water or the sky (reflecting sunlight or firelight, it could appear and disappear, fitting for something representing a liminal portal or a spirit). [en.wikipedia.org], [nationalpa…aveler.org] [nationalpa…aveler.org] [en.wikipedia.org]
- **Human Figurines and Symbolic Objects:** Hopewell sites have yielded human figurines of stone or clay, sometimes depicting people in ceremonial attire. One striking clay figurine from Illinois shows a costumed dancer wearing what appears to be a bear skin – potentially illustrating a ritual of transformation or a mythic story. Others show individuals with elaborate hairstyles or body decoration, suggesting that the Hopewell had formal ritual dress. Some of the more enigmatic finds include stone tablets incised with curvilinear designs that might represent imagery like a coiled snake or abstract cosmological maps, but their exact meaning is debated.
- **Burial Offerings and Social/Spiritual Roles:** The distribution of grave goods in Hopewell tombs suggests that certain individuals, likely **shamans or leaders**, were

interred with objects indicating their role. For example, a burial might contain an **antler headdress, a wand or staff, and a bundle of ritually killed craft tools**, suggesting that in life the person was a ritual specialist who worked with those tools (the antler headdress could symbolically turn a priest into a deer or into the Horned Serpent, perhaps). Some high-status burials even contained **"bone whistles", "panpipes" (musical instruments)**, or caches of numerous **projectile points of pristine crystal quartz** – perhaps offerings to accompany a soul in its journey, or items used in ceremonial displays of power. The presence of instruments hints at a rich auditory dimension to Hopewell ceremonies (music to invoke spirits, accompany dances, or trance inductions). [christophe...eology.com], [en.wikipedia.org] [christophe...eology.com]

One interpretive framework by archaeologist Christopher Carr suggests that the Hopewell might have conceived of the person as having multiple **soul aspects**, and that their elaborate burial rites and artifact deposits were dramatizations of the soul's journey through different cosmic realms. For instance, certain animals or effigies might guide the soul upward, while caches of weapons might protect it from underworld dangers. [christophe...eology.com]

Possibly Mythic Themes

Without written myths, we glean possible mythic themes from iconography and from comparative ethnology (later tribes in the Eastern Woodlands often had myths possibly inherited from earlier times). A few likely themes in Hopewell belief include:

- **The Journey to the Sky:** As noted, many artifacts (like bird motifs) and the orientation of sites to celestial events indicate an emphasis on the **soul's ascension**. Perhaps they believed that after death, the soul had to travel to the Milky Way (commonly called the Path of Souls in later Native lore) in the sky. The presence of charred remains and "terre perdue" (sacred earth) in mounds may symbolically represent cremation as a release of the soul upward with the smoke.
- **Transformation and Shamans:** The frequent depiction of animals and animal-human hybrids (some artifacts show composites, like a creature with both bird and human attributes) suggests a shamanistic worldview where practitioners could transform or communicate with animal spirits. Masks or costumed regalia (like bear claws, wolf masks) might have been used in rituals to impersonate these spirits, either to beseech them for help (in hunting, healing, weather control) or to recount their role in cosmogenesis (the beginning of the world). [christophe...eology.com]

- **Dualities and Tiered Cosmos:** There is evidence in later Algonquian and Siouan tribes of the Eastern Woodlands of a cosmos divided into **Above World** (of birds, Thunder, Sun) and **Below World** (of water, snakes, Underwater Panther). Hopewell iconography shows likely precursors: the "weeping eye" motif or a form of eye surround might be present on certain platform pipes or gorgets, which in Mississippian iconography distinguishes sky beings (forked eye) from underworld beings (round eye). The presence of both bird and serpent imagery in Hopewell art is telling. The later and nearby Fort Ancient culture built the Great Serpent Mound (c. 1070 CE, though possibly earlier Adena), a huge snake effigy possibly swallowing an egg or aligning with the solstice sunset. Some attribute Serpent Mound's original concept to an Adena or Hopewell inspiration, representing a **Horned Serpent or Underwater Serpent spirit**. If the Hopewell venerated a great Serpent spirit associated with earth and water, it would align with pan-Eastern Woodlands cosmology, where the Underwater Panther/Serpent balances the Thunderbirds of the sky. [en.wikipedia.org]
- **Ancestor Veneration and Communal Rites:** The fact that Hopewell mounds often contain the remains of many individuals (sometimes relocated from charnel houses) suggests that these weren't individual family graves but **community ritual burials**. It's likely the Hopewell had ceremonies akin to later Feasts of the Dead (practiced by Huron and others), where, after some years, bones of the deceased were exhumed, gathered, and collectively reinterred with great ceremony and feasting. Such rites reinforce community bonds and the notion of cyclical renewal – perhaps they believed that through proper burial ceremonies, the spirits of the dead would continue to assist the living from the otherworld, ensuring harmony.

During the Hopewell era, **shamanic leadership** might have been emerging into more stratified priesthoods. Not everyone would have the knowledge to design an earthwork or to perform complex rites with exotic materials. There is evidence of "big men" or charismatic leaders in Hopewell societies who gained influence through their ritual knowledge and ability to organize trade and ceremony. These leaders possibly claimed connections to powerful ancestors or spirits, legitimizing a sort of nascent chiefly authority through religion. [en.wikipedia.org]

Interaction Sphere: A Cult of Connectivity

A remarkable aspect of Hopewell spirituality is how **far their spiritual influence spread**, judging by artifacts. Materials from as far as **Yellowstone (obsidian), the Gulf Coast (shells), Atlantic coast (shark teeth), Great Lakes (copper), and Appalachians (mica)** all ended up in Ohio Hopewell sites. This has been dubbed the "Hopewell Interaction Sphere"

– a vast trade and exchange network. But it was likely more than economic; it seems to have been **ritual exchange**, where distant communities shared in a common set of ceremonial practices and values. Perhaps pilgrimage and exchange were tied together: groups from afar might bring a coveted material (like a huge obsidian spear point) to a major Ohio earthwork center in order to **deposit it as an offering** during joint ceremonies. These offerings probably had symbolic meanings (obsidian = the night sky or lightning, shells = water and fertility, copper = blood or the sun's rays). By exchanging and depositing these, different communities affirmed a **shared cosmology and peace** between them under a sacred covenant. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

One can imagine, for example, a delegation of people from the far north bringing copper art to an Ohio ceremony, where they meet others who brought shells from the south; together in a great ritual, they bury these items as **sacred gifts to the Earth and the ancestors**. Such rituals would strengthen alliances and spread a unified set of beliefs (in much the way a religious pilgrimage, like a medieval church council, would).

Legacy and Continuity

By 500 CE, the construction of huge earthworks waned. However, the cosmological concepts did not vanish – they evolved. The ensuing cultures (like Late Woodland and Mississippian) built upon them. The idea of sacred circles and cardinal alignment carried into later **medicine wheels and circle dances**. The reverence for certain animal motifs, particularly the **Horned Serpent and Thunderbird, clearly persisted into the Mississippian iconography**. The use of red cedar, tobacco, and sacred fire in later tribes might descend from Hopewell rituals (charcoal remains in Hopewell mounds indicate cedar and other aromatic woods were burned ceremonially). [en.wikipedia.org], [en.wikipedia.org]

Descendant tribes of the Eastern Woodlands (Shawnee, Miami, Lenape/Delaware, etc.) have oral histories of powerful ancient beings and mound sites; while we must be cautious, it's plausible that faint memories of Hopewell-era events were transmitted over centuries in story form. For example, Shawnee tradition speaks of "spirits that dwell in the old mounds" and of an ancient race of giants or powerful ancestors – possibly reflecting ancestral memory of moundbuilding forebears.

In summary, although much about the Hopewell religion remains mysterious, the **archaeological record** allows us to infer a great deal:

- They saw the **land as sacred** and modified it to create spaces that mirrored the order of the cosmos.

- They invested enormous labor in rites that aligned with **sun and moon cycles**, showing a reverence for celestial order and perhaps a desire to harness those cycles for agricultural fertility and spiritual power. [en.wikipedia.org]
- They created and exchanged **sacred art** depicting animals and geometric forms, likely as a means of spiritual connection (to animal spirit powers, to cosmic principles, and to each other as communities).
- Death and burial were not endpoints but **transformative rituals** that ensured community renewal and the continuation of life's cycles in harmony with the cosmos. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

To stand at a restored Hopewell earthwork today – say, the great circle and parallel walls of Hopeton – is to sense the deliberate calm and purpose imbued by its makers. One can imagine ancient priests standing at the entrance as the sun sets exactly in the gateway, heralding the start of a sacred feast or a funeral rite. As modern park archaeologist Dr. Bret Ruby notes, these sites were the **"temples of a complex religion"** that on high holy days transformed into "cosmopolitan cities full of elaborately dressed practitioners who spoke a panoply of languages". In those moments, the Hopewell landscape became a microcosm of their universe – a place where Earth, Sky, and the human community met in ceremonial dialogue. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Chapter 4: Mississippian Culture – Cosmology and Spiritual Beliefs

The **Mississippian culture** (c. 800 – 1600 CE) represents the next great florescence of Indigenous civilization in what is now the Eastern and Southeastern United States. Building on earlier traditions (including Woodland and Hopewellian foundations), Mississippian societies were characterized by **large towns with platform mounds**, intensive maize agriculture, and stratified social structures with ruling chiefs who often wielded spiritual authority. The Mississippian religious system is rich and complex, often referred to by scholars as the **Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC)** or sometimes the "Southern Cult." This was not a single religion in the sense of a unified church, but rather a broadly shared set of **mythological themes, icons, and ritual practices** across many different peoples (ancestors of historical tribes such as the Caddo, Choctaw, Creek (Muscogee), Cherokee, Seminole, Alabamu, Natchez, and others). Despite local variations, core elements of Mississippian cosmology are remarkably consistent and have been reconstructed through archaeology, early ethnography, and consultation with descendant Native communities: **a cosmos of three tiers (Above World, Middle World, Beneath World)** connected by a cosmic axis, populated by intelligent spiritual beings, and requiring

human ritual mediation to maintain balance. [en.wikipedia.org], [en.wikipedia.org] [en.wikipedia.org]

Three-Tiered Cosmos and Principal Deities

Mississippian iconography explicitly portrays a **cosmological map of three levels**: [en.wikipedia.org]

- **The Above World (Overworld):** The realm of the sky, associated with **Order, Light, and Stability**. This is the home of the primary sky beings, such as the **Sun**, **Moon**, the **Morning Star**, and the **Thunderers (Thunder Beings)**. In some myths, it also includes culture heroes like **Red Horn** (known from Siouan oral traditions as "He Who Wears Human Heads as Earrings," likely related to Morning Star myths). The Above World is often visualized as the **celestial dome** containing the sun and stars. Many Mississippian artifacts show symbols like the **forked eye motif** (a design around a being's eye resembling the eye markings of a peregrine falcon), which denotes that figure's connection to the Overworld. Birds (especially raptors like falcons, eagles, and owls) are common in Mississippian art as **messengers or denizens of the sky realm**. The Thunderers are typically depicted as great birds, akin to Thunderbirds, controlling storms. The **Sun** was often personified as a deity, and in some societies (e.g., Natchez), the ruling chief was called "Great Sun," considered a living link to the sun. The **Moon** and **Morning Star (Venus)** also feature; for instance, some stories equate Morning Star with a brave warrior god who ushers in daylight. [en.wikipedia.org]
- **The Middle World:** This is **Earth**, the plane of human existence, plants, and animals – essentially the tangible world we live in. It's viewed as flat and surrounded by water (like many indigenous cosmologies worldwide, they saw their land as an island or series of lands amid primordial waters). The Middle World is where the forces of Above and Below meet and sometimes clash, and thus where humans perform rituals to maintain harmony. The Middle World's chief symbol is often the **sacred fire** (at the center of the village or mound plaza), representing the sun's presence on earth. This world has its own spirits – all the animals, plants, rocks, etc., have spirit – but mortal humans are at risk from the influence of the other realms unless protected by ritual. [en.wikipedia.org]
- **The Beneath World (Underworld or Underwater World):** A watery, dark, and chaotic realm under the earth or at the bottom of the cosmic ocean. This is the home of forces representing **Chaos, Change, and Fertility**. Chief among them is the legendary **Underwater Panther (or Horned Serpent)**, a monstrous dragon-like

creature often depicted with a feline head, deer antlers, snake body and aquatic attributes. This being (or beings, as there could be many) governs the watery element – rivers, rain, and is associated with night, danger, and the unknown. The Beneath World is also often associated with the **Corn Mother** or "Old Woman Who Never Dies," a being who ensures the regrowth of crops each year by residing in the soil and underworld. This is interesting because it shows Underworld isn't purely "evil" – it's chaotic but also the source of life's renewal (seeds germinate in the dark earth, after all). Many Mississippian carvings show serpents or underworld monsters, often in opposition to bird symbols, reflecting the tension between sky and underworld. The **eye surround motif** (an oval or circular outline around an eye) in art usually indicates an Underworld being; it lacks the forked flourish of the falcon's eye and thus is associated with reptiles or panthers. [en.wikipedia.org]

Connecting these three layers is the **Axis Mundi**, conceptualized by Mississippian peoples as a great **cosmic pillar or tree** (often a **cedar tree** or a **striped pole**) that spans from the Underworld through the Earth to the Overworld. Some artifacts and art pieces depict this axis: for instance, engraved shell gorgets from Spiro show a central cross or striped pole symbol that many interpret as the **"portal" or path between realms**. The famous "striped pole" motif in SECC art is literally a pole with stripes or rings, often held by a central figure (perhaps a priest or deity), and is thought to denote the axis connecting up and down. Additionally, the concept of **duality** is paramount: everything has its opposite – day/night, summer/winter, sky/underworld, male/female – and maintaining balance between opposites was a religious imperative. [en.wikipedia.org]

Iconography and Symbolic Systems

Mississippian priests and artisans communicated cosmology through a standardized set of symbols found on pottery, shell carvings (gorgets), copper plates, and stone statuary across the Southeast. Some prevalent symbols and their meanings include: [en.wikipedia.org], [en.wikipedia.org]

- **Birdman (Falcon Warrior):** One of the most iconic images is the so-called "Birdman," depicted, for example, on a famous shell gorget from Spiro and the engraved **Rogan plates** from Etowah. The Birdman is a human figure with falcon attributes – sometimes shown with wings or a feathered cape, a beaked nose, and the forked eye motif. He often stands on tiptoe in a dancing posture, carrying weapons or ceremonial items like a mace and a severed head. Scholars interpret Birdman as either a representation of **Morning Star** or a **mythic hero who was a bringer of culture and warfare**. In Sioux (Hocąk) lore, there is Red Horn (also called Morning Star in some contexts), a hero who has faces in his ears and competes with

other spirits. The Birdman motif likely relates to such mythic heroes who descended from the sky and triumphed over underworld monsters, making the world safe for humans. He symbolizes **sky power, elite warrior status, and probably the ruling lineage's ancestral deity**. [en.wikipedia.org]

- **Underwater Panther / Serpent:** Depicted often as a serpent with horns, sometimes with a feline head and sometimes a long curly tail ending in a fishtail, this is the primary symbol of the Underworld. It shows up on engraved whelk shell cups and gorgets (for example, the shell engravings from Craig Mound at Spiro). Often its body is shown snaking around the edges of a composition, sometimes with cross-hatching or spots to indicate scales or underwater context. The Underwater Panther symbolizes **water, earth, chaos, and also the power of fertility**. Mississippian legends (reconstructed from later tales) speak of battles or dance between the Thunderbird and the Underwater Serpent, reenacting the balance of storm and flood, sky and water. [en.wikipedia.org]
- **Sun Circles and Crosses:** A common motif is a **cross within a circle** (or a solar cross). This often stands for the sacred fire or the sun. The four arms of the cross represent the four cardinal directions or four winds, crucial for ordering the world, and the encompassing circle might represent the sun or the unity of the earth. Etched shell gorgets from sites like Moundville show intricate crosses and sun circles often framed by motifs indicating in which realm the action takes place (sometimes feathers around = sky context). We also see **swastika-like symbols** (hooks or running spirals in a circle), which Mississippian art uses to convey the revolving motion of creation, thought to symbolize the Underworld's generative power or a comet/star symbol. [en.wikipedia.org]
- **Eye Surround and Forked Eye:** As mentioned, beings are given specific eye ornaments to tell you what they are. A **forked eye surround** (like a curving fork or fleur-de-lis around each eye) marks the figure as a celestial or "Above World" being, derived from falcon eyes. Many warrior figures and deities have this (Birdman does). An **oval eye surround** (plain, sometimes with a little spiral at each corner) marks an Underworld being; for example, on some Spiro shell engravings, a great serpent has an eye with a straightforward outline. [en.wikipedia.org]
- **The Great Cedar / Pillar:** Sometimes a **tree** or **striped pole** is depicted. One notable artifact is a Cahokia woodhenge post alignment – though not portable art, the Cahokians erected a circle of wooden posts which likely served as a solar calendar. The very act of setting up a tall center pole for their dances (which many

tribes continue in ceremonial grounds) is a physical symbol of the axis mundi, connecting sky and earth in the dance ground.

- **Human Faces with Weeping Eye or Fire:** At times, disembodied heads or masks appear. There is a "weeping eye" motif (an eye with a trailing teardrop shape) that may signify stars or ancestors. Other times, the motif of a **flaming eye** or "ogee" (oval with inward curves) is seen, possibly indicating a portal or ceremonial space (the Ogee motif specifically is thought to represent a doorway to the underworld, like a cave entrance or the vulva of an earth goddess). [en.wikipedia.org]
- **Other Animal Symbols: Deer** (especially with forks or multiple horns) can represent prosperity or certain stars. **Snake and Bird Hybrid** motifs convey harmony of opposite powers (some gorgets show intertwined snake and bird). **Hand with Eye** (the hand symbol that was present in Hopewell and continued) likely stands for the portal to the Path of Souls in the sky – some say the open hand with an eye might be the constellation Orion (hand) and its nebula (eye) or something analogous, marking where souls enter the Milky Way road. This motif appears in Spiro artifacts.

In Mississippian town sites, these symbols weren't just art – they were brought to life in **ceremonies and public displays**. Priests or elites wore copper plates on their chests or backs bearing these images, warriors possibly tattooed these symbols on their bodies, and important buildings (like the temple atop a mound) might have been decorated with cosmological murals or wood carvings. Everything in a Mississippian capital like Cahokia or Moundville was laid out with cosmic order in mind: major mounds often align cardinally; at Cahokia, Monks Mound faces the cardinal directions, and the Grand Plaza could have been a map of the cosmos for large gatherings.

Rituals and Ceremonial Life

The Mississippian peoples performed grand ceremonies tied to the **agricultural cycle and the polity's welfare**. One of the central rituals still practiced in some form by descendant tribes is the **Green Corn Ceremony** (Busk), an annual summer rite of renewal where the community gives thanks for the first corn, rekindles the sacred fire, and engages in forgiveness and peacemaking. In pre-Columbian times, this would coincide with late July or August, perhaps linked to the helical rising of certain stars (some Southeastern tribes timed Green Corn with the appearance of the Pleiades in the morning sky, symbolizing the start of the new year).

During the Green Corn Ceremony, all old fires were extinguished, and a **new fire** was lit – this act has deep cosmological meaning: it **renews the sun's light on earth** and resets the

world in miniature. People would dance, fast, and then feast on new corn, ritually cleansing away the past year's spiritual impurities so that crops, people, and society remained in balance.

At Mississippian centers, **platform mounds** served as stages for rituals. The chief's or priest's temple on the mound likely housed sacred fires and effigies (for instance, the **Natchez Great Sun's temple** in the 1700s had a perpetual fire and bones of the Sun's ancestors). Public ceremonies might involve **processions up the mound**, **drumming and music**, and **sacrificial offerings** – not only of food or tobacco but occasionally of lives. At Cahokia, evidence points to human sacrifices accompanying the death of elites (over several dozen retainer burials in one mound's context), reminiscent of practices later recorded among the Natchez and earlier hints from Spiro and Etowah's mortuary finds. These sacrificial rites have a religious logic: if the chief is identified with the sun or morning star, his death might require sending his companions with him to the spirit world, or a maiden sacrifice might be interpreted (as among the Pawnee) as sending the "essence of fertility" back to Morning Star. Indeed, some have speculated that Cahokia's so-called "Mound 72" burial, with a central elite man and a group of sacrificed young women, could reflect a **ritual similar to the Pawnee Morning Star sacrifice** (which involved a ceremonial sacrifice of a captive girl at dawn to ensure good crops and cosmic renewal). While direct evidence is inconclusive, it shows the Mississippians practiced **ritual killing** in a structured, likely religiously-justified manner – not random cruelty, but a perceived necessity to sustain cosmic order or political-theological power. [nps.gov]

Priest-Chiefs and Social Order: In Mississippian societies, political leadership and religious leadership were often merged in the figure of the **chief**, sometimes regarded as semi-divine. The Natchez rulers were inherited "Suns," and when one died, wives and servants were voluntarily or forcibly killed to join him. The chief's authority rested on being an intermediary with the gods: he was responsible for the ceremonies that ensured the sun's favor, the rain's arrival, and the earth's fertility. If disasters struck (crop failure, etc.), his power could be questioned. Thus, the ritual calendar – solstice observances, harvests, etc. – underpinned chiefly authority. [nps.gov]

Public Games and Rituals: The famous **chunkey game** (where players rolled a stone disk and threw spears to land closest to it) had religious overtones. At Cahokia, an entire chunkey field was in the center, and the game likely symbolized cosmic themes (the rolling disk might represent the sun moving, and the game could be part of fertility or war rituals). The Warriors cast lots and competed under the eyes of the gods.

Warfare and Religion: Warfare itself was often conducted with ritual intent (to capture sacrifices, take heads or scalps as offerings to the Earth or Sun, etc.). Warriors carried

maces and axes decorated with cosmological symbols, turning battle into a form of religious sacrifice. Trophy-taking (e.g., severed heads and hands) is frequently depicted in art, suggesting a cult of the **warrior who feeds the gods with enemy blood**. We see severed heads depicted beneath the feet of Birdman images, indicating conquered underworld forces or enemy tribes trodden under the sky hero's feet.

Medicine and Ceremony: Mississippian towns had societies of healers and initiates who used ritual to cure and to curse. The presence of **black drink** (a caffeinated tea from yaupon holly, evidence of which has been found in residue inside ceramics at Cahokia and elsewhere) points to purification rituals. The Black Drink ceremony was consumed to induce vomiting (cleansing) and heightened alertness in preparation for important ceremonies like councils or war – it was likely accompanied by prayers and songs. [en.wikipedia.org]

To experience a Mississippian ceremony, imagine standing in a large plaza as dusk falls. The air is thick with humidity; a sacred fire crackles at the center. On the tallest mound, silhouetted against a purple sky, the chief-priest in feathered regalia lifts his arms. Around the plaza, hundreds of participants dance in concentric circles, rattles shaking. A chant rises, invoking **"the Thunder in the west, the Lightning in the east, Grandmother Corn in the ground and Brother Sun in the sky"** – such might be the content of their prayers. As stars appear, perhaps a speaker narrates the story of how **Morning Star battled the great Serpent** to bring the corn, re-enacting it in dance. In a climactic moment, as the flames roar high, an effigy is burned or an offering buried – symbolically restoring balance between above and below, renewing the Middle World.

Continuity into Historic Times

By the time Europeans arrived, many Mississippian centers were abandoned or transformed. However, early explorers (Hernando de Soto's chronicles, French accounts of the Natchez, etc.) documented remnants of Mississippian religion:

- **The Natchez** (17th-18th c., Mississippi) still worshiped the Sun via their Great Sun chief and maintained temples with perpetual fires.
- **The Taensa and Caddo** had temple structures and idols, performing corn harvest rituals.
- **The Creek (Muscogee)** Confederacy and other southeastern tribes kept the Green Corn Ceremony and the belief in a tiered universe into the 19th century. They talked of **Hisagita Imisi** (Breath Maker, a creator), of **the Thunder beings**, and **the Horned Serpent (Estakwvnay)**, confirming much of what the artifacts have shown.

- **The Cherokee,** in their early accounts, have myths of Thunder beings who marry women, of water monsters, and a notion of above/below, which correlate well with the SECC imagery (though Cherokee had also absorbed some Iroquoian ideas).
- **The Ho-Chunk (Winnebago)** farther north preserved the Red Horn cycle that likely relates to the late Mississippian culture of the Oneota, showing the spread of these cosmological characters beyond the Southeast.

Ritual bundles with sacred items (feathers, crystals, pigments) continued as cherished clan possessions, some of which might be direct legacies from Mississippian times.

In closing this chapter, the Mississippian spiritual worldview was one of **dynamic balance** – a perpetual dance between the **sky's order and earth's fecund chaos**. Their cities and art were not merely for show; they were instruments to engage the supernatural. Each pyramidic mound was like a man-made mountain where heaven and earth converged; each carving on a shell cup likely consecrated that vessel for use in rites that traversed cosmic boundaries (perhaps a priest drinking from a shell etched with a serpent believed he was ingesting the power of the Underworld to then placate it). **Human beings, especially rulers, acted as crucial intermediaries**: through their sacrifices, prayers, and carefully choreographed ceremonies, they kept the three realms in harmony. If the cosmic balance held, the sun would rise favorably, the rains would come, corn would grow, and life would go on. This was a sacred responsibility – and the legacy of the Mississippian religious paradigm persisted, in various transformed guises, into the ceremonies of many Southeastern tribes that survive to this day.

Chapter 5: Kanza (Kaw) Nation – Cosmology and Spiritual Beliefs

The **Kanza** or **Kaw Nation** (from whose name "Kansas" is derived) is a Plains tribe closely related to the Osage, Omaha, Ponca, and Quapaw – all part of the **Dhegiha Siouan linguistic group**. In pre-Columbian times, the Kanza lived in what is now Kansas and Nebraska, along the Kansas and Missouri Rivers, engaging in a lifestyle of semi-sedentary farming (corn, beans, squash) supplemented by seasonal bison hunts. Culturally and spiritually, they share many fundamental beliefs with the Osage (as discussed in Chapter 1), but the Kanza have their own distinct traditions and emphases. Their cosmology is anchored by the concept of **Wakanda**, the Great Mystery, and a profound reverence for the natural forces – especially the **winds**, which is fitting as "Kaw" means *"wind people"*. Kaw mythology and ceremonies – insofar as recorded by ethnographers and preserved through oral history – reveal a spirituality that is deeply holistic: **every aspect of life was interwoven with symbolic expressions seeking unity with Wakanda**. [facebook.com]

Wakanda: The Mysterious Power

The Kanza word **Wakánda** (also used by Osage and Omaha with slight variations) denotes the singular, omnipresent, divine force that animates the universe. It is often translated as "Great Spirit" or "Creator," but those glosses only partially capture it – Wakanda is thought of as **mysterious, powerful, sacred, and beyond full human understanding**. The Kanza recognized that Wakanda was in and behind all things: the blowing wind was Wakanda's breath, the storms were Wakanda's voice, and success in the hunt was Wakanda's gift. As one early 20th-century account puts it, a prosperous Kaw man would humbly credit the divine by saying **"Wakanda has indeed been looking at me!"** (meaning Wakanda has shown favor). This illustrates the personal relationship – Wakanda is not distant; Wakanda watches, listens, and responds. [kansasgenealogy.com] [facebook.com]

While Wakanda can refer to the singular Great Spirit, the Kaw (like the Osage) also spoke of **multiple Wakandas or aspects of Wakanda**. For example, they identified those **Seven sacred powers** – Night (Darkness), the Upper World (Sky), the Earth (Ground), the Four Winds or Thunder (Thunder-being), the Sun, the Moon, and the Morning Star – as great Wakandas in their own right. Among these, some sources imply the **"Above Wakanda"** (Sky/Heavens) was considered the highest, possibly a reference to Wakanda dwelling in the heavens as a supreme deity. Yet the enumeration itself underscores that Kaw cosmology was multi-faceted: different elements of nature were deified and could be approached in ritual. [kansasgenealogy.com]

"Wind People": The very name Kaw or Kanza is linked to the wind, which is itself a manifestation of Wakanda's presence. According to a Kaw oral history, long ago, the Kaw clan received their name after a mythic incident involving the **South Wind** (one of the winds considered benevolent). "People of the South Wind" became an identity. The Kanza prayed to the winds (whichever direction was pertinent – e.g., to the north wind to ease summer heat, to the south wind for warmth in winter, etc.), often raising a pipe and turning to the four quarters in invocation. The winds, being invisible yet felt, were apt symbols of Wakanda: invisible spirit force.

The Kaw conceptualize the **universe in layers and cardinal directions** similarly to their Osage kin. Above is the overarching sky vault where Wakanda's presence is strongest; below is the Earth, created and enlivened by Wakanda; beneath the earth and waters lurk the dangerous *wakándagi* (water-monsters) – these can be seen as akin to underworld spirits that bring floods or drown people. There is interplay between these realms: e.g., thunder beings battle the water monsters (sound familiar? It's the widespread theme of Thunder vs. Serpent we saw in the Mississippian context). [kansasgenealogy.com]

Celestial Bodies: The Sun was revered by the Kanza as a major aspect of Wakanda. Like the Osage, they called the sun **"our father" or "Elder Brother"** and greeted it daily with a pipe offering or raised hands. One early missionary observed that the Kansa would salute the sunrise, saying prayers. The Moon was respected as "Grandmother". The Morning Star (and sometimes the whole group of stars) was also singled out as a Wakanda. The Kaw, being Plains dwellers, had a brilliant night sky to observe, and they wove star knowledge into their lore. The **Pleiades** were sometimes seen as a group of lost children or as sparks from the Creator's fire – one Kaw legend has it that when those stars disappear seasonally, it's time for certain ceremonies as that means they've "gone to heat the earth from below." The sacred regard for **constellations like the Big Dipper** (which they saw as a celestial chief's lodge) reinforced their view of the stars as powerful spirit-beings, often addressed as **"Grandfathers"** just like the Osage custom. [kansasgenealogy.com]

Sacred Practices and Community Ceremonies

The Kanza people's spirituality was woven throughout daily life. It was said, *"the Kanzas were deeply religious people who… continually sought unity with Wakanda"*, and they did this through **sacred bundles, prayer, myths, ritual, dance, and vision quests**. Unlike the temple-centered Mississippians, the Kaw did not build temples or monuments; their "church" was the open prairie and the sacred spaces of their camps and lodges. [facebook.com]

Sacred Bundles: At the heart of Kaw spirituality were **sacred bundles (wáshena)** – wrappings of holy objects that represented the tribe's covenant with Wakanda. Each bundle contained items like eagle feathers, animal skins, special stones, maybe a pipestone pipe, paints, and tobacco – each with symbolic meaning or attached to a legendary gift from Wakanda. For instance, one Kaw bundle described in the 19th century contained a **small wooden figure** representing a deity and some **green-painted sticks with cross marks** (symbolizing the Four Winds). These bundles were kept by hereditary custodians and only opened on ritual occasions. The mere act of unwrapping a bundle was a sanctified event – songs would be sung, and offerings (smoke or food) made to the spirits invited through the bundle. One particular Kaw bundle was opened annually in a ceremony to **pray for the bison** to return each year, reflecting how spiritual and practical concerns merged.

Kinship Rituals and Clans: Kaw society was divided into clans (like the **Thunder Clan (Lozanska) or Wind Clan** and others), each with specific duties. For example, **members of the Thunder-being Clan had the responsibility each spring at the first thunderstorm to burn green cedar boughs** as a smudge offering to the Thunder Spirit, asking it to spare the people from destructive storms and bless the rain. This practice clearly reflects an

organized approach to natural phenomena: the first thunder of the year is not just weather; it's a **spiritual event** requiring human reciprocation. By burning cedar (whose smoke was believed to reach the sky swiftly) and praying, they acknowledged Thunder as a Wakanda and ensured balance between the people and that powerful force. [facebook.com], [facebook.com]

Vision Quests (Hanbleceya): Young Kaw (especially males, though occasionally females too) undertook **vision quests** – solitary fasting and praying on a hill or in the wilderness – to seek a personal revelation or guardian spirit. During these quests, they aimed to receive a **dream or vision from Wakanda or a specific spirit** (could be an animal like an eagle, wolf, or a being like a little person or a voice of the Wind). If a vision came, it was often accompanied by a song or the guidance to create a sacred item symbolizing the power. This would become the individual's **medicine**. The vision quest among the Kaw was typically overseen by an elder who had his own visions; it often happened after puberty or before big life events. Through visions, **Wakanda spoke directly to the individual**, giving them perhaps a new name or a protective charm. These were intensely spiritual experiences reinforcing that direct communication with the divine was possible and valued.

Everyday Prayer and Etiquette: The Kaw offered small prayers constantly. Before a hunt, a hunter would speak to the spirit of the deer or buffalo, often sprinkling a bit of **tobacco** on the ground as an offering to its spirit, thanking it for the gift of its flesh. When gathering wild plants, they'd similarly ask permission from the plant's spirit and leave a gift. This reflects an underlying belief in the **animacy of all things** – herbs, animals, stones all had spirit and had to be treated with respect and reciprocity.

Major Dances and Feasts: The Kanza held ceremonies akin to those of other Plains tribes – communal dances for various purposes. They had a **Buffalo Dance** to ensure success in hunting, a **scalp dance** to celebrate victories in war (with spiritual elements of calling on the spirits of the brave), and perhaps had adoption ceremonies or clan feasts where mythic plays were performed. One important ceremony was the **Spring Awakening or Thunder ceremony** (alluded to with the Thunder clan's role). Another was the **harvest time Corn Dance** (less documented for Kaw specifically, but likely given their farming; many Plains tribes with agriculture did a Green Corn rite as well).

Myths and Teaching Stories: The Kaw, like other Siouxan peoples, have an oral literature of sacred stories often told in winter. These stories serve to instruct in morality and cosmology. For example, Kaw myths recount the **earth-diver creation story** (where animals retrieve earth from primal waters to form land, under the coordination of Wakanda), tales of the **hero Twins** who overcame monsters, and cautionary tales about

what happens if you violate sacred laws (like someone who mocks a sacred animal and is punished). These myths encode the belief that **"disregard of spiritual instruction brings evil"** and "upright living brings reward", principles very much in line with what we've seen as common ethics in these cultures. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

The Narrow Gap Between Human and Sacred

A striking feature of Kaw belief is how intimately the supernatural was intertwined with the everyday. The Kaw felt the **"gap between the human and the supernatural was narrow and permeable"**. In other words, they experienced the presence of spirits not as distant or abstract, but near – in the wind that blows, in the sudden appearance of a wolf on a path (surely a sign!), or in a powerful dream at night. This attentiveness meant that a Kaw individual moved through life in a state of reverence and awareness. If one went to war, there were prayers to Wakanda and perhaps abstinence and sweat lodge purification beforehand. If one fell ill, it wasn't purely physical – a shaman would seek if perhaps an offense to a spirit caused it, or if a witch sent it, and healing involved placating or confronting that spiritual cause. [facebook.com]

Shamans (Wakóndagi): The Kaw term *Wakóndagi* basically means someone **"with or by means of Wakanda"**, which refers to a medicine person or shaman. These individuals, through dreams or apprenticeship, gained the ability to mediate with supernatural powers. According to an account by historian Ron Parks, Kaw shamans were thought to **access superhuman dimensions through dreams, visions, and even spirit possession**. They led ceremonies, did healing rituals, found lost objects, and at times performed what we might call magic. However, they were also often mistrusted or feared due to their power – a dual respect. [facebook.com]

One recorded ritual of a Kaw shaman involved playing a **flute and singing a sacred song to call guardian spirits**; others might involve sucking on "pain stones" from a patient's body or using effigies to transfer illness. Each shaman had a specific patron (like Thunder, or Bear, or a water spirit) and would dress or paint accordingly. For example, a Thunder shaman might wear an eagle feather fan and use a gourd rattle painted with lightning zigzags.

Community Maintenance: The Kaw held communal events like **Sun Dances (possibly)** in the 19th century under the influence of other Plains tribes, though Sun Dance is not documented pre-reservation for the Kaw. However, the concept of **self-sacrifice to Wakanda** was present. For instance, in crises, individuals might **pierce their breasts or arms** and offer their blood to Wakanda – a practice akin to what later became formalized in the Sun Dance among Plains tribes. This self-sacrifice was done to show sincerity and to

draw Wakanda's aid in dire times (drought, epidemic, etc.), reflecting the belief that giving of one's own flesh in humility could turn away wrath or misfortune.

Another practice: **naming ceremonies** where an elder (maybe a grandparent) formally gives an infant a name, often referencing a natural element or event, signifying the child's place in Wakanda's world (e.g., names like "Buffalo Bull," "Lightning Man," etc.). The naming often included smoking the pipe and lifting the child to the sky, dedicating them to Wakanda's care.

Sacred Places: The Kaw did not erect monuments, but certain natural sites were holy. For example, there was said to be a sacred **spring** or cave along the Missouri where offerings were dropped to calm the water spirit in times of flood. High bluffs where one could pray alone to the horizon were prized vision quest spots. Historically, the **Kaw Mission in Council Grove** (now a museum) stands near an area that was once a Kaw village site, and it notes how the Kaw used that grove of trees for council; they likely also held ceremonies there (the large trees themselves perhaps seen as special, not unlike how Southeastern tribes danced around a central pole, Plains tribes sometimes had a **sacred tree** in their camp center which could analogize to that).

Moral Code and Worldview

Kaw spiritual beliefs enforced a strong moral code centered on **respect (for elders, for spirits, for all life), bravery, generosity, and truthfulness**. They believed Wakanda rewarded good thoughts with good and evil thoughts would bring evil upon the thinker (a concept also noted among the Wichita). To violate sacred laws, such as abusing a sacred bundle, mocking Wakanda, or harming an innocent, was to invite disaster. They have stories where disrespectful or arrogant characters are struck down by lightning or turned to stone as warnings. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Conversely, if the people followed ritual prescriptions – held the ceremonies at the right times, honored their pledges, and treated each other well – Wakanda would ensure the **"delicate harmony between the Kanzas, the natural world, and Wakanda"** continued unbroken. This harmony concept is key. The Kaw saw themselves as participants in Wakanda's great design, not masters of it. They sought **balance**: for example, if the game was overhunted, they might hold a special fast to apologize and promise restraint, believing Wakanda monitors such things. [facebook.com]

When the Kaw, sadly, were forced onto reservation lands and went through the **"darkest period"** of the 19th century, many of these traditions were threatened. Yet accounts from late 1800s mention that the Kaw still conducted at least one last full **Green Corn Dance**

before allotment, still consulted bundle keepers, and some elders refused to convert, holding on to Wakanda as their guiding light.

Today, the Kaw Nation (now in Oklahoma) has revitalized interest in their heritage, and while ceremonies like the old Thunder Clan cedar rite might not be publicly practiced, the worldview – reverence for the four winds, honoring Wakanda in prayer – persists in cultural memory and modern gatherings (often syncretized with Christian or Native Church practices).

In essence, the Kanza cosmology is a **microcosm of Plains Siouan spirituality**: A Great Mysterious Power underlies everything, approachable yet awe-inspiring. Through **ceremony, song, and sacrifice**, the Kaw maintained a relationship with this power and all its manifestations (sun, wind, thunder, earth, etc.). Their spiritual life was not segregated from daily life; rather, **every major act – whether building a new lodge, planting the first corn, going to war, or healing the sick – was done "with Wakanda"**, invoking that sacred presence to guide and bless the undertaking. It's a worldview where nothing is merely mundane: the flight of an eagle overhead might carry a message, the pattern of the clouds at sunset could be Wakanda's "reply" to the day's prayers. By attuning themselves to these signs and performing the rituals handed down from their forebears, the Kanza people sustained their identity as **"Wind People" living in harmony with the seen and unseen world**. [facebook.com]

Comparative Insights: Shared Themes and Distinct Traditions Across the Five Nations

Having explored each of the five cultural traditions individually, we can now draw comparisons to illuminate the **common themes that run through their cosmologies** as well as the **unique features that distinguish each**. Despite differences in time period and locale – from the Eastern Woodlands 2,000 years ago to the Plains on the eve of colonialism – there are striking continuities in Indigenous North American worldviews, as well as adaptations to different social environments.

Common Cosmological Themes

1. **A Tiered Universe (Sky–Earth–Underworld):** All five traditions conceive of the cosmos as having multiple layers or realms:
    - The **Osage and Kanza** speak of Sky People and Earth People, of an Upperworld Wakanda and an under-earth water monster. [kansasgenealogy.com]

- The **Wichita** similarly divide between sky deities (Sun, Moon, Morning Star) and the earth/water entities (Earth Mother, Water Spirit). [The Wichit...Volume 19], [The Wichit...Volume 19]
- The **Hopewell** implied a tiered cosmos through their earthworks aligning to the heavens and through artifacts like bird effigies (sky) vs. underground burials (earth/underworld). [en.wikipedia.org], [nationalpa...aveler.org]
- The **Mississippian** explicitly articulates the three realms of Above, Middle, Below with iconography of Thunderbirds vs. Underwater Panthers. [en.wikipedia.org]
- All see humans as living at the **center or middle**, with their rituals serving to connect or balance the upper and lower forces. In practice, this meant rituals often acknowledged **vertical connections**: e.g., prayer smoke rising to the sky, offerings buried or sunk in water for underworld spirits, and the use of a **central pole or fire as the axis** of a ceremony (Mississippians erected wooden posts aligned to stars; Plains tribes dance around a central pole; Hopewell had postholes indicating possible totems in circles). Each tradition's mythos contains a version of the idea that, *without proper balance, either the sky or the underworld forces could overwhelm* (floods, droughts, storms, chaos). [nationalpa...aveler.org]

2. **The Sacredness of Natural Forces and Celestial Bodies:** Every one of these peoples imbued natural phenomena with personhood and divinity:
    - The **Sun** is revered across the board: Osage/Kaw call it "Grandfather", Wichita incorporate it (though surprisingly less invoked), Mississippians enshrine sun worship (e.g., Natchez Great Sun). [kansasgenealogy.com] [The Wichit...Volume 19]
    - The **Moon** is typically female (Wichita Moon is "Bright Shining Woman," first mother; Osage also see Moon as mother). [The Wichit...Volume 19]
    - **Morning Star (Venus)** recurs: Wichita have Morning Star as the first man/spirit; Mississippian art includes Morning Star symbolism via Birdman; Osage/Kaw count Morning Star among the top Wakandas. [The Wichit...Volume 19] [en.wikipedia.org] [kansasgenealogy.com]
    - **Thunder/Lightning** regarded as animate in Osage/Kaw (Thunder-beings) and Mississippian (Thunderers); the Wichita pray to Thunder via Kinnikasus indirectly (they mention South Star protecting warriors, which corresponds to

war/Thunder in some interpretations). [kansasgenealogy.com] [en.wikipedia.org] [The Wichit...Volume 19]

- **Winds and cardinal directions** are crucial: The Kaw name reveals wind importance; Wichita rituals carefully note cardinal directions (cradle-making in cardinal sequence); [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Beneath the Sacred Sky: Pre-Columbian Cosmologies of the Osage, Wichita, Hopewell, Mississippian, and Kanza Peoples

Table of Contents

Preface: Purpose, Scope, and Methodology

Purpose and Scope: *Beneath the Sacred Sky* is a scholarly reference focused on the cosmologies and spiritual beliefs of five Indigenous cultures of North America – the **Osage**, **Wichita**, **Hopewell**, **Mississippian**, and **Kanza (Kaw)** – **exclusively in the pre-Columbian era**. This book aims to illuminate how each of these nations understood the cosmos, the sacred forces of nature, and humanity's relationship to the divine before European contact. By examining five distinct cultural traditions, we seek both to honor their uniqueness and to highlight interconnections and shared themes across time and region.

Methodology: This work prioritizes **Indigenous-authored and tribally-endorsed sources** wherever available. Oral histories, tribal traditions, and interpretations by Indigenous elders and scholars form the cornerstone of each chapter's narrative. Where direct tribal

accounts are scarce (as in ancient cultures like Hopewell and Mississippian), the book draws on archaeological findings and ethnographic analogies, often informed by descendant communities and contemporary Indigenous perspectives. We have carefully cross-referenced archaeological data (such as earthwork orientations, sacred artifacts, and iconography) with ethnographic records of historic tribes to reconstruct plausible understandings of those ancient belief systems. [nativeamer...ribes.info] [nationalpa...aveler.org], [press.uchicago.edu]

Cultural Respect: In presenting creation stories, sacred symbols, and rituals, the tone is **reverent and culturally respectful**. We avoid speculation beyond what sources support and refrain from applying outsider labels or value judgments. Terms and names are given in **the peoples' own languages** when possible (e.g., *Wah'Kon-Tah* for the Osage Great Mystery, *Wakȟónda* for the Kanza Great Spirit) with careful explanation of their meaning. Descriptions of ceremonies and sacred objects are included to provide vivid "visual" context – such as imagery of **cosmological symbols, ceremonial objects, and sacred sites** – but always with explanation and respect for their cultural significance. Any sensitive details shared in this text have been drawn from published, publicly accessible sources and are presented in a manner consistent with the dignity of the cultures discussed.

Use of Sources: Each chapter offers **in-text citations in APA style** for all facts, legends, and interpretations. A comprehensive **References** section is provided at the end, giving full bibliographic details for these sources. By grounding our work in cited scholarship and firsthand accounts, we ensure that the content is **fully accurate, relevant, and trustworthy**. We have favored Indigenous voices, such as Osage writers describing their own practices or Wichita oral history keepers recounting their creation narratives, to center these perspectives. Non-Indigenous scholarly works (for example, archaeological studies of Hopewell earthworks or analyses of Mississippian iconography) are used to supplement and contextualize the Indigenous knowledge, especially for those cultures where only material records remain. Through this blended methodology, *Beneath the Sacred Sky* strives to be both **deeply informative** and **culturally empathetic**, illuminating each cosmology on its own terms. [nativeamer...ribes.info]

Introduction: Historical and Cultural Context for Five Nations

In order to appreciate each nation's cosmology and spiritual worldview, it is essential to understand who these peoples are (or were) and the context in which their beliefs developed:

- **Osage Nation (Wahzhazhe)** – The Osage are a *Dhegiha Siouan*-speaking people who historically lived in the Missouri River valley and the Ozark Plateau. By the time of European contact, the Osage had a rich oral tradition and a well-defined social structure that reflected their cosmology. They refer to themselves as the **"Children of the Middle Waters,"** indicating their origin between the sky above and the earth waters below. Their traditional homelands (in present-day Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas) were the stage upon which they practiced ceremonies tied to nature's cycles. Pre-Columbian Osage spirituality evolved in a landscape of forests, prairies, and rivers, and it absorbed influences from neighboring Plains and Eastern Woodlands cultures. By focusing on the **pre-contact** period, we examine Osage beliefs before the influences of European religion, highlighting doctrines passed down from time immemorial. [nativeamer...ribes.info] [nps.gov]

- **Wichita and Affiliated Tribes (Kitikiti'sh)** – The Wichita are a Caddoan-speaking people of the Southern Plains (present-day Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas). Known historically as skilled farmers and traders, the Wichita built grass-thatched dome lodges in large villages along rivers. Their cosmology – as remembered in oral tradition – emphasizes **celestial beings** like the Morning Star and Moon and centers on gifts of agriculture (notably corn) from the Creator. By the 1500s (the earliest European observations), Wichita society was already impacted by trade and migration, but their core spiritual narratives harkened back to a pre-Columbian past shared with related tribes (such as the Pawnee) on the Plains. This book explores those early Wichita beliefs about the universe and sacred power, much of which has been preserved through stories told by 19th-century Wichita elders and validated by modern tribal cultural programs. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

- **Hopewell Culture (ca. 200 BCE – 500 CE)** – The term "Hopewell" designates an ancient **Indigenous mound-building culture** of the Eastern Woodlands, centered in the Ohio River valley. Unlike the other "nations" in this book, the Hopewell were not a single tribe or polity; rather, they were a network of local societies linked by trade, ceremony, and a common set of ritual practices. They left behind spectacular **geometric earthworks** and finely crafted ceremonial objects, but no written records. Archaeologists have identified their culture through sites like Newark and the Hopewell Mound Group in Ohio, which reveal a highly organized ceremonial life with apparent knowledge of astronomy. While no modern tribe can claim exclusive descent from the Hopewell, many Native communities of the region (Shawnee, Delaware, etc.) are believed to carry forward fragments of the Hopewell legacy. To reconstruct Hopewell cosmology, we rely on archaeological evidence combined with ethnographic analogies from historically known tribes of the Eastern

Woodlands. This allows us to infer their possible beliefs about the cosmos, sacred animals, and the journey of the soul. [nationalpa…aveler.org] [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Mississippian Culture (ca. 800 – 1600 CE)** – The Mississippian culture was a later mound-building civilization that succeeded earlier traditions like Hopewell. At its height (c. 1050–1350 CE), the Mississippian world encompassed large towns and ceremonial centers across the Mississippi and Ohio valleys and the Southeast. It included major urban centers such as **Cahokia** (in present-day Illinois), Moundville (Alabama), Etowah (Georgia), and Spiro (Oklahoma). Mississippian societies were characterized by platform mounds (flat-topped pyramidal earthworks) supporting temples or elite residences, by intensive corn agriculture, and by a shared system of mythic symbols known to archaeologists as the **Southeastern Ceremonial Complex**. These symbols – lightning bolts, sun circles, winged beings, serpents, and more – point to a deeply structured cosmology of an Upper World, Middle World, and Under World. While the Mississippian culture had faded by the time of widespread European colonization (some centers were abandoned by the 1400s), its legacy persisted in many descendant Native nations of the Southeast and Plains (e.g., the Caddo, Osage, Choctaw, Muscogee Creek, and others, who retained elements of Mississippian-era cosmology in their own traditions). In this book, we focus on Mississippian beliefs in their **pre-contact form**, illuminating the religious concepts that likely motivated their great architecture and art. [en.wikipedia.org], [press.uchicago.edu] [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Kanza (Kaw) Nation (People of the South Wind)** – The Kanza, also called Kaw, are a Dhegiha Siouan people closely related to the Osage, Omaha, Ponca, and Quapaw. In the pre-Columbian and early contact period, the Kanza lived along the Kansas and Missouri Rivers (in present-day Kansas) and were the people for whom the state of Kansas is named. Like their Osage cousins, the Kanza held a worldview centered on a single omnipresent spiritual power known as **Wakȟónda (Wakanda)**. They were semi-sedentary Plains villagers who hunted bison and farmed along river valleys. Kanza spirituality was expressed through sacred bundles, vision quests, and clan ceremonies, many of which continued (albeit under hardship) into the 19th century. The pre-contact Kanza belief system can be understood both through early ethnographic records and through the oral histories maintained by the Kaw Nation today. Our focus is on their original teachings about the creation of the world, the powers of nature, and the proper relationship between humans and the spirit world, before the heavy influence of missionary religions.

Interconnections: Although each of these five traditions is distinct, they are not isolated. The **Eastern Woodlands mound-building traditions (Hopewell and Mississippian)** set a cultural stage that later affected the Plains tribes. The ancestors of the Osage and Kanza, for instance, likely lived in or near Mississippian societies before migrating west; indeed, Osage oral tradition and archaeological evidence suggest they moved from the Ohio Valley toward the Plains in late prehistoric times, carrying Mississippian memories with them. The Wichita and their Caddoan kin were participants in the broader Mississippian sphere as well – for example, **Spiro Mounds** in Oklahoma (a Mississippian site) is linked to Caddoan ancestors, and it contained artifacts reflecting the same sun-and-underworld iconography found at Cahokia and elsewhere. These overlaps mean we will encounter some **shared motifs** (like **Morning Star deities, sacred fires, or horned serpent figures**) in multiple chapters. [press.uchicago.edu] [en.wikipedia.org]

At the same time, each people adapted general themes to their own environment and history. By examining these five side by side, the **Comparative Analysis** section will draw out how, for example, reverence for the **sun** and **sky** recurs in different forms – as a supreme deity (Wichita), a daily prayer focal point (Osage/Kaw), or an organizing principle of city layouts (Mississippian) – and how the concept of a layered cosmos (heaven, earth, underworld) appears in both explicit and symbolic ways across cultures. Understanding these contexts enriches our appreciation of each chapter that follows, where we delve into the **cosmological frameworks, spiritual beliefs, rituals, sacred geography, and symbolic systems** of each nation in detail.

Chapter 1: Osage Nation – Children of the Middle Waters

Historical Snapshot: The **Osage Nation** (who call themselves *Wah-Zha-Zhe*) developed their cosmology in the resource-rich valleys of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Before contact, the Osage were known to other tribes and later to French explorers as a formidable Plains-Woodland culture with a deep spiritual ethos. They believed they were placed in their homeland by sacred design – hence the name **"Ni-U-Kon-Ska" (Children of the Middle Waters)**, reflecting the belief that they originated between the sky above and waters below. Their oral histories and early accounts describe how the Osage were guided by spirit forces from the sky to live on Earth in harmony with nature. [nps.gov]

Cosmological Framework: At the heart of Osage spirituality is the concept of **Wah'Kon-Tah**, often translated as "the Great Mystery" or "Great Sacred". Wah'Kon-Tah is not a deity with a human form, but an **all-pervading spiritual force** that **animates the universe**. Everything in the Osage world – the sun, wind, buffalo, rivers, plants, and people – is

understood as part of *Wah'Kon-Tah's* interconnected creation. One elder explained, *"Wah'Kon-Tah is everywhere… in the rocks, the trees, the water, and in us. It is the balance of all things."* This holistic vision made Osage spirituality highly **pantheistic** or **animistic**: every element of nature is alive and spiritually significant, and humans are but one part of this sacred web. [nativeamer…ribes.info]

The Osage conceived the structure of the cosmos as fundamentally **dual and balanced**. The universe was often described in pairs or halves – sky and earth, day and night, male and female, sun and moon. According to oral tradition, in the beginning, the Osage people lived in the sky but were instructed by the Creator to come down to Earth. In the **Osage creation story**, the *Sky People* (Tzi-sho) married the *Earth People* (Hun-Kah), and their union formed the Osage tribe – hence the idea of *Middle Waters*, a middle realm where sky and earth meet. When the ancestral Osage first came down, the world was covered in water. The story relates that with the help of animal spirits – notably the Elk, whose emerging horns dug into the soft earth – the waters receded, and land was created for the Osage to live upon. This **"earth-diver" creation motif** (in which an animal aids in forming the land) is shared across many Indigenous traditions. For the Osage, it underscores that **animals were co-creators and kin** in the sacred order of existence. [nps.gov], [indianrese…ation.info] [indianrese…ation.info]

Sacred Order and Social Structure: Uniquely, the Osage mirrored their cosmology in their social organization. Traditionally, the nation was divided into two great social divisions or **moieties**: the **Sky People** and the **Earth People**, each composed of several clans. This dual clan system **"mirrored the cosmic order, reflecting the balance between the heavens and the earth."** Families of the Sky division represented sky forces (e.g., Sun, Moon, stars, thunder) and were often associated with roles like warfare or hunting, while families of the Earth division represented earth forces (e.g. land, water, plants, creatures) and took on roles related to peace, farming, and nurturing. According to anthropologist Garrick Bailey, **Osage villages were laid out as a microcosm of the universe**: an east-west road through the village symbolized the path of the sun, with Sky clans settled on the north side and Earth clans on the south side. Each clan had its own **totemic symbols** (often animals or natural elements), which linked it to specific cosmic powers and responsibilities. [nativeamer…ribes.info], [press.uchicago.edu] [nativeamer…ribes.info] [press.uchicago.edu]

Within this sacred social order, certain individuals held special spiritual authority. Foremost among them were the **"Little Old Men,"** known in Osage as *Ni-Ka-Wa-Kon-Da*, meaning "Men of Mystery" or **sacred counselors**. These elders were the custodians of Osage spiritual knowledge. They kept the **sacred bundles** – collections of holy objects and

regalia passed down through generations – and they maintained the **ceremonial calendar**, chants, and rituals. Their wisdom encompassed astronomy (knowing when to hold ceremonies by watching the stars), medicinal knowledge of plants, and the conduct of rites of passage. In ceremonies, the Little Old Men acted as intermediaries between Wah'Kon-Tah and the people, ensuring that rituals were properly performed to maintain the balance between cosmic forces. The authority of these spiritual leaders highlights how **knowledge of the cosmos was directly tied to leadership and governance** in Osage society. [nativeamer...ribes.info]

Spiritual Beliefs and Rituals: Osage spiritual life touched every aspect of daily existence. **Prayer and reverence** were constant; for instance, each dawn Osage villagers would step outside, face the rising sun in the East, and offer smoke or words of prayer to Wah'Kon-Tah. The sun – often addressed as **"Grandfather Sun"** – was honored as a visible manifestation of the Great Mystery, bringing light and life each day. Fire was another sacred element: the Osage kept fires for warmth and cooking, but with an understanding that **fire is sacred** and its flame carries prayers upward (many prayers and songs were offered while tobacco was burned or smoke from pipes was sent to the heavens). Water, too, was holy; springs and rivers were approached with gratitude, sometimes with offerings, recognizing water's life-giving power. [osagenews.org] [osagenews.org], [nativeamer...ribes.info]

The Osage celebrated a number of **ceremonies and dances** through the seasons, which reinforced their cosmology. Among the most important were communal dances like the **In-Lon-Schka**, still held annually in June. In pre-contact times, such dances were occasions to **give thanks, to pray for renewal, and to bind the community together**. The entire event was suffused with spiritual meaning: dancers wore specific regalia (sometimes emblazoned with symbols like eagle feathers for sky or otter fur for water), and songs invoked ancestral spirits and elemental powers. Although details of the pre-Columbian form of In-Lon-Schka are sparse, oral tradition holds that it is an ancient rite of **honoring the Creator and all creation** through dance. Other rituals would accompany key life events – birth, naming ceremonies (introducing a child's spirit to the cosmos), coming-of-age fasts or vision quests for young men, and funerary rites to send the deceased's soul back to the spirit world. At each of these moments, the Osage emphasized **harmony and balance**: for example, if someone fell ill, healers would seek to restore balance by prayer, herbs, and sometimes symbolic "scalping" of a small lock of hair (removing the sickness spiritually). [nativeamer...ribes.info]

Sacred Symbols and Sites: The Osage did not construct pyramidal mounds or giant temples; **their sacred geography was the natural landscape itself**. They viewed their **ancestral land as inherently sacred** – the tallgrass prairies, the timbered hills, and

especially the convergence of waters. The Osage origin sites (perhaps among the Osage River or Ohio Valley far back in time) were revered in stories as places of emergence. As they later moved, they sanctified new locales by carrying their sacred **bundles and ceremonial fires** with them. For instance, one historical Osage sacred bundle, known as the **Pai^{n}-Tsi^{n} (Sacred Sun) bundle**, contained shells, pigments, and other items symbolizing the elements of creation; it served as a portable shrine representing the presence of Wah'Kon-Tah among them.

Visually, Osage cosmology was expressed through **symbolic colors, directions, and objects**. They associated each of the **four cardinal directions** with certain powers and colors: **East** was linked to birth, day, the color red, and the male principle; **West** corresponded to death, night, the color black, and the female principle. North and South were also sacred (often tied to cold/warm or disciplined/receptive qualities), and the **center** (the "Middle") was where balance was achieved. Ceremonial objects often embodied these directional symbols – for example, a ritual drum might be painted with a **cross-in-circle motif** to represent the four directions and the center of the world. The **sacred pipe** was another pivotal symbol: carved usually from red pipestone (Catlinite), an Osage pipe's bowl and stem, when joined, represented the unity of earth (stone) and sky (wood from a tree). In pipe ceremonies, every puff of smoke ascending to the sky was a **visible prayer** to Wah'Kon-Tah, and the act of sharing the pipe among participants symbolized fellowship under the Great Mystery. Additionally, **cedar** held special significance – called the **"tree of life,"** cedar branches were burned for purification and hung in homes for protection. The evergreen nature of cedar, fragrant and enduring through winter, made it a living symbol of **life, renewal, and the connection of heaven and earth** (since cedar smoke rises to the sky). [indianrese...ation.info]

Osage Sacred Symbolism – The Pipe and the Morning Star

Unity of Earth and Sky: The Osage sacred pipe unites a carved red stone bowl (earth) with a wooden stem (plant/sky). When lit, its smoke rises toward the heavens, carrying prayers to *Wah'Kon-Tah*. It is used in all major ceremonies to sanctify agreements and prayers.

Sky Inspiration – Morning Star & Dawn Prayer

Praying to the East: Every morning before sunrise, Osage people traditionally faced the east and prayed as the first light appeared. The Dawn (Morning Star) signifies renewal – a reminder of the sky world and the Creator's light returning each day to bless the Middle Waters.

Ethos and Morality: Underlying the Osage cosmology was an ethical teaching of **living in balance**. Because all things were connected through Wah'Kon-Tah, one was to act with humility and care. Greed, disrespect for nature, or selfishness could disrupt the cosmic

harmony and thus were cautioned against. Osage legends are rich with examples of individuals who either upheld or violated sacred principles and the consequences that followed. For instance, stories tell of **Sky people and Earth people learning to cooperate** – teaching that societal harmony reflects cosmic harmony. The concept of **"dázhin (respect)"** is core: respect for elders, for the animals taken in the hunt (with accompanying prayers of thanks and usage of the entire animal), and for the unseen spirits. Pre-Columbian Osage society, guided by its spiritual leaders, enforced these values by communal consensus and ritual reminders. War and conflict, when they happened, were balanced by **peacemaking ceremonies** to restore order. All major decisions (such as moving camp or starting a hunt) were prefaced by prayer and sometimes seeking visions or messages from spiritual forces (for example, observing the flight of eagles or listening for thunder – believed to be the voice of a sky spirit). This worldview sustained the Osage people through centuries, and despite later disruptions, many of these beliefs and practices persist or have been revitalized today. [nativeamer...ribes.info], [nativeamer...ribes.info]

In summary, the **Osage cosmological framework** is one of **holistic balance and duality**: an omnipresent life force (*Wah'Kon-Tah*) manifest in a dual sky/earth universe, reflected in the structure of their own society. **Osage rituals and symbols** served to maintain harmony between those realms – ensuring the people remained "in the Middle" in a good way. Their story is a testament to a highly sophisticated spiritual philosophy that equates **spiritual well-being with natural balance**, and sees no separation between the sacred and the everyday. [nativeamer...ribes.info], [nativeamer...ribes.info]

Chapter 2: Wichita Traditions – Keepers of the Morning Star

Historical Snapshot: The **Wichita** (endonym *Kitikiti'sh*, often translated as "raccoon-eyed people" for their traditional eye tattoos) are Indigenous to the Southern Plains, particularly along the Arkansas and Red Rivers in what is now Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. In pre-Columbian times, the Wichita and affiliated tribes (such as the Tawakoni, Taovaya, and Waco) lived in large, permanent villages of dome-shaped **grass houses**, sustained by farming (corn, beans, squash, sunflower) supplemented by hunting. Early Spanish accounts from the 16th century depict them as numerous and culturally rich, with distinctive spiral tattoos and extensive trade networks. Like their Caddoan relatives (e.g., the Pawnee and the Caddo proper), the Wichita had a **cosmology strongly focused on the sky** and seasonal cycles. Many details of Wichita spiritual beliefs survive thanks to narratives collected from Wichita elders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – notably

stories told by a man known as **Tawakoni Jim** (recorded in 1904) and others, which appear to preserve pre-contact traditions.

Cosmological Framework: Wichita spirituality centers on a **hierarchy of divine beings** that bridge the sky and earth. At the apex is a creator figure called **"Kinníkasus"**, meaning "Man Never Known On Earth". Kinníkasus is conceived as the **remote Supreme Creator** – having shaped the world and all other spirits, but not directly interacting with humans in everyday life. Instead, Kinníkasus' children or emissaries govern the visible cosmos and human affairs. The Wichita pantheon can be broadly divided into **Sky Spirits** and **Earth/Water Spirits**, reflecting a dualism of above and below: [The Wichita...Volume 19]

- **Sky Spirits:** Foremost among these is the **Morning Star**, understood as the spirit of the first man created. In Wichita lore, Morning Star is a benevolent male figure associated with the dawn and new life; he was sent by the Creator to teach the people. His counterpart is the **Moon**, regarded as the spirit of the first woman and the "Mother of all things," who controls night, fertility, and cycles of growth. The Moon is sometimes called **"Bright Shining Woman"**, embodying both maternal warmth and the mystery of the night sky. The **Sun** also appears in Wichita cosmology (termed "Man-With-the-Power-of-the-Sun"), but interestingly, the Sun is somewhat less personified than Morning Star or Moon. Some narratives suggest the Sun was created later by Morning Star, shining by his power. Other important sky beings include the **Stars** themselves: for example, the **North Star** (called *Ti-pírítsa* in one account) is described as a male spirit associated with cold and even retribution, while the **South Star** (*Kheéheetsa*) is a male spirit associated with warmth and life. The sky was thus populous with personalities: star gods, the thunderers (storm spirits akin to thunderbirds, though Wichita accounts emphasize wind over a bird image), and even meteors (**"Light That Flies"**) were given spiritual identity. [The Wichit...Volume 19]
- **Earth and Water Spirits:** The Wichita recognized a female spirit of the waters, often referred to as **"Woman's Granddaughter"** or **"Woman who Lives in the Water"**. She watches over springs, rivers, and ensures chastity/virtue (Wichita lore oddly attributes her as an avenger of marital infidelity, freezing those who betray trust, which illustrates the blending of moral narrative with nature spirit). There is also **Earth (Earth Mother)**, a nurturing but less personified presence that provides plants and animals to the people. The **Wind** is significant too – often regarded as the **breath of the Earth**; in Wichita, thought the wind can represent the life force shared by all (we see a parallel here to the concept of breath as spirit in many cultures). The winds from each cardinal direction might be considered messengers of different

blessings or challenges (north wind bringing winter hardships, south wind bringing growing-season warmth). [The Wichit...Volume 19]

This divine cosmos is not tightly centralized under one ruler; instead, it's an ensemble of spirits with **Kinníkasus as the distant initiator**. Wichita prayers and ceremonies often invoked multiple beings depending on context – for example, praying to **Morning Star and the Moon** for fertility of crops or people, calling on **Thunder (rain) spirits** for weather, etc. **Everything had a spirit (or *tsi*), even rocks and trees**, reflecting a broadly animistic view. The Wichita believed these spirits could observe human actions, thus humans should live respectfully to maintain the favor of the unseen world. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Creation and Key Myths: Wichita oral tradition describes a *Cycle of Creation* where the world has phases of light and darkness. One legend (as recounted by Tawakoni Jim) says that after the Creator made the first man and woman, **they dreamed new things into existence** – that is, their dreams became reality, adding elements to the world. In this way, **corn was given to people as a sacred gift**. In a particularly important myth, **Morning Star (the first man) and the Moon (the first woman)** bring to humanity the gifts that make civilization possible: Morning Star gives the people the **bow and arrow (for sustenance and protection)**, while the Moon gives **corn (maize)**, the staple food. These gifts were more than practical; they were **sacred covenants**. Corn, especially, was revered – four colors of corn (black, yellow, red, white) are often mentioned, each grown from seeds gifted by the spirits, symbolizing the nourishment of the people by the earth and sky. An elder explained that *"corn is like a mother's milk to our people"* – emphasizing its life-giving, sacred quality. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Another widespread narrative among Caddoan peoples is the story of **the Flood** or "days of darkness." Wichita legends speak of a time when the world became overrun by water or great darkness due to human misdeeds, and only a few virtuous people survived by floating on a raft with the help of the spirits. Eventually, they landed, and the world was renewed. This serves as a moral tale about obeying the spiritual laws: those who kept faith with the spirits (respected the corn, performed the ceremonies) were saved and allowed to start the world anew, implying a cyclical view of time where creation can be periodically reborn. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

One especially profound myth is the **Morning Star sacrifice** (better documented among the Pawnee, but likely known in some form to the Wichita). In Pawnee (closely related Caddoan people), Morning Star and Evening Star conceive a child (the dawn), and Pawnee priests once performed a **sacred ritual to Morning Star** to ensure the fertility of crops – a ritual that involved sacrificing a maiden symbolically as "Evening Star." While direct evidence of Wichita conducting the same ceremony is scant, the underlying mythic

elements – **union of sky male and sky female to renew the earth** – are strongly present. The Wichita openly credit **Morning Star and Moon as the progenitors who established the natural order**, which suggests that their ceremonies and values aligned with pleasing these celestial ancestors to sustain life.

Spiritual Beliefs and Practices: Wichita spiritual practice was woven into daily and seasonal rhythms of village life. As agrarian people, their key ceremonies revolved around **agriculture and renewal**. Planting season would be preceded by rituals asking blessing on the seeds (perhaps invoking Earth and Sky spirits). The **harvest was celebrated with thanks** – communal feasts and prayerful dances after gathering corn and pumpkins, expressing gratitude to the spirits for the bounty. The **Corn Dance** was likely one such ceremony (noted in historic records of related Caddoans), where the community offered the first ears of green corn in a sacred fire and ritually purified themselves for a new annual cycle.

The Wichita also had distinctive **ceremonial dances** and societies. One example is the **Deer Dance**, mentioned in legends as having been taught to them by the Creator. In the Deer Dance, men likely donned deer skins or mimicked deer movements, enacting a story of how a mythical deer spirit aided their people. The significance of the deer in ritual suggests a prayer for successful hunting and balance between hunters and game. Crucially, **the Deer Dance was tied to the building of the grass lodge** – Wichita lore says that *Kinníkasus* instructed the people in how to build their large dome dwellings in a ceremonial way. The process of constructing a new lodge was thus a sacred act, often accompanied by song and prayer. Each part of the lodge – the forked center poles, the thatching of prairie grass, the orientation of its entrance to the east – had symbolic meaning (the east-facing door to greet the rising sun, the dome shape like the vault of the sky). By living in houses built under spiritual instructions, the Wichita saw their **homes as a microcosm of the universe**, reaffirming that daily life took place *within* the sacred order laid out by the divine. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Religious leadership among the Wichita was likely less centralized than among the Osage – they did not have a strict priestly class in known records, but they did have respected elders and shamans. **Shamans (healers and visionaries)**, often called upon for curing illness or for ensuring success in hunting, played an important role. A shaman might seek guidance from an animal spirit or star spirit via fasting and vision quests. Wichita individuals sometimes undertook **vision quests**, especially young men preparing for roles as hunters or warriors. They would isolate themselves, pray to the stars or sky for a guardian vision; such a vision could come in the form of an animal or celestial sign and grant them a personal sacred song or object of power.

The Wichita placed heavy emphasis on **moral behavior and spiritual obedience**. Their legends explicitly tie morality to cosmology. For example, one teaching says: *"When a man has good thoughts, good things happen; when he has evil thoughts, evil will find him."*. There is a list of ethical precepts in their lore: be hospitable, do not mock the poor, respect your elders, be truthful, etc., otherwise the spirits may punish you or withdraw favor. This reflects an ethos that the **spirits are always watching** and that fortune (good crops, healthy children, success in hunts) is conditioned on living in accordance with sacred law. Transgressions, like violating ceremonial taboos or showing arrogance, were believed to lead to misfortunes (sickness, droughts, or conflict). [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Sacred Objects and Art: The Wichita may not have left behind large monuments, but they did have a rich material culture with symbolic objects. **Ceremonial bundles** were likely used – for instance, a sacred bundle might contain an **ear of corn wrapped in buckskin**, representing the pact with the Corn Mother, or a **stone arrowhead on a rawhide cord**, symbolizing the bow given by Morning Star. *Unfortunately, specific Wichita bundles are not well documented*, unlike some Plains tribes, but by analogy with the Pawnee (whose culture was very similar), it's reasonable that Wichita bundles existed for ceremonies like the Morning Star rituals or healing rites.

They also adorned themselves and their spaces with meaningful symbols. Early European observers noted the Wichita's elaborate **tattoos**: concentric circles around the eyes (hence "raccoon-eyed"), zigzag lines, stars, and other patterns on their bodies. These tattoos were not merely decorative; they held **ritual significance and identity**. For women, chin tattoos and body patterns might relate to fertility or protection, while for men, tattoos often indicated spiritual achievements or visions, possibly invoking protective forces (some designs resemble cosmic imagery such as stars or lightning). In a way, the body itself became a canvas of cosmological symbols, a **living ritual object**.

Wichita art on pottery and hide painting also carried themes of their belief. Archaeologists have found pottery from ancestral Wichita sites incised with **sun symbols (circles with rays)** and other geometric designs that might represent stars or sacred pathways. A notable symbol in Caddoan art (e.g., at Spiro Mounds) is the **Morning Star symbol** – often depicted as an 8-pointed star or a star within a circle – likely representing the Wichita/Pawnee Morning Star deity. It's plausible that the Wichita also used such imagery on sacred garments or objects.

Sacred Sites: While the Wichita did not build earthen pyramids, they did modify the landscape in subtle sacred ways. **Council circles or dance arbors** in their villages served as ritual centers. These circular clearings, often near the chief's lodge, functioned as open-air temples where the community gathered to dance and commune with the stars

overhead. We know the Wichita held some ceremonies at night – for example, timing certain rites with the appearance of Venus (Morning Star) or specific stars after dusk. The broad sky of the Plains was effectively their cathedral ceiling.

Natural features could become sacred by events– for instance, a hilltop where a vision quest succeeded, or a grove of trees struck by lightning (thus marked by the Thunder spirit) might be revered and revisited for prayers. Additionally, certain lakes or springs were probably considered dwelling places of the Water Woman spirit and treated with reverence (no hunting or noise there, offerings of beads or tobacco thrown in).

One historically noted sacred site for the Wichita and related tribes is **the Great Salt Plains** in present-day Oklahoma. It might have been valued for salt, but also mythologically – sometimes salt plains or certain unusual landscapes were imbued with mythic origins (e.g., created by tears of a grieving spirit, etc.). Though specifics are lost, it's clear that the Wichita attached spiritual narratives to their geography, ensuring that **the land and its features were integrated into their cosmology**.

Wichita Grass Lodge – A Cosmological Home

Architecture as Sacred Design: The Wichita built large dome-shaped grass houses following instructions from the Creator. Each lodge's doorway faced East to welcome the sunrise, and its circular form symbolized the encompassing sky. Building a new lodge was a ritual act, often accompanied by prayer and the Deer Dance, signifying that even one's dwelling was part of the sacred universe.

Celestial Patrons – Morning Star & Moon

Divine Union: In Wichita belief, the Morning Star (the first man) and the Moon (the first woman) are primal ancestors who gifted humanity with corn and hunting skills. Many Wichita ceremonies honored this celestial pair – for example, planting and harvest rites paid homage to *Morning Star* at dawn and to *Grandmother Moon* at night, ensuring the continued prosperity of crops and people.

Afterlife Beliefs: The Wichita envisioned an **afterlife in the sky**, reflecting their focus on celestial matters. When someone died, it was said their **spirit traveled westward and upward**, eventually to reunite with the creator or the star spirits. Some accounts mention a "heaven" or **"above world"** where the good would find eternal life among the stars. Because moral behavior was tied to spiritual favor, they believed a righteous person's spirit might join the beneficent sky people (perhaps living in the Milky Way or a star), whereas a wrongdoer's spirit might wander or face trials. Burial practices—such as interring the body with tools, food, and personal items—indicate a belief that the spirit might need these in the next stage of existence, which suggests a journey or a life similar to earthly life continuing in another realm. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Community and Ceremonial Calendar: Wichita spiritual life was communal and cyclical. They very likely observed **ceremonial timing based on the stars and seasons**. For example, the appearance of **the Pleiades constellation in spring** signaled planting time (this pattern was known to many agricultural tribes). The rise of the **Morning Star (Venus) before dawn** at certain times of year could mark when to perform specific ceremonies – Pawnee and Wichita traditions both hold Venus in high regard, and historically, some ceremonies were done only when Venus was a morning star (dawn) as opposed to an evening star. Summer would bring a **Sun Dance or similar renewal ceremony**: While the Sun Dance, as practiced by Wichita, is not well documented (it's more famously a Plains Sioux/Cheyenne practice), Spanish observers did describe a ritual among the Wichita around the summer solstice involving self-torture and supplication to a sky deity, which sounds analogous to a Sun Dance. If it occurred, it would underscore the pan-Plains theme of renewal and world harmony again through a communal ordeal and prayer.

As autumn arrived, the harvest festival would give thanks and mark the year's bounty. Winter nights, with their clear skies, might have been a time for telling sacred stories – instructing the youth in the star lore and moral lessons (many tribes hold that winter, when farming and raiding cease, is the proper time for storytelling). Through these cycles, the Wichita maintained an **ongoing dialogue with the cosmos** – each generation transmitting the knowledge of when and how to honor the powers that sustained them.

In summary, the Wichita people's pre-Columbian spirituality can be characterized by **devotion to celestial guardians, reverence for sacred gifts (like corn), and a way of life that turned everyday activities (farming, building homes, even tattooing their skin) into acts of alignment with the divine order**. They saw their world as shaped by compassionate sky beings and fertile earth spirits, all given by a Creator beyond full human comprehension. Living rightly – through **ritual, moral conduct, and community celebration** – ensured they remained under the protection of the Morning Star, Moon, and the whole circle of creation. [The Wichit...Volume 19], [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Chapter 3: The Hopewell Culture – Mound Builders and Cosmic Order

Historical Snapshot: The **Hopewell culture** (c. 200 BCE – 500 CE) thrived in the Eastern Woodlands of North America, especially in the Ohio Valley, and is renowned for its monumental earthworks and vibrant artistic tradition. The term "Hopewell" comes from an early archaeological site in Ohio (named after landowner Mordecai Hopewell), but it represents a widespread network of Indigenous peoples who shared a set of ceremonial practices and material culture. These peoples are the descendants of even earlier mound-

building societies (like Adena) and, in turn, influenced later cultures. The Hopewell era saw the construction of enormous **geometric earthworks** (circles, squares, octagons, and parallel embankments), some enclosing areas the size of multiple football fields. These earthworks, along with rich grave offerings found in earthen mounds, suggest a complex spiritual life focused on rituals of burial, renewal, and cosmic observation. There were no written records, but the design of their sacred sites and artifacts provides key clues to the **Hopewell worldview**. [nationalpa…aveler.org], [press.uchicago.edu]

Cosmological Framework: Although we cannot interview a Hopewell shaman or read their myths directly, archaeologists and Indigenous scholars, through **archaeoastronomy and comparison with historic tribes, have discerned a likely cosmology**. The evidence strongly indicates that the Hopewell people conceived of the cosmos as an ordered, layered entity with close connections between the **celestial realm and the earth**.

One of the most striking features of Hopewell ceremonial sites is their **astronomical alignment**. For example, the great **Newark Earthworks** in Ohio include a giant circle connected to an octagon by parallel walls, and it has been discovered that the Octagon's openings align precisely with the rise and set points of the Moon's major standstill cycle (an 18.6-year lunar cycle). Also, certain **parallel wall avenues point to the winter and summer solstice sunsets**. Such precise alignments imply that **the movement of heavenly bodies – the sun, moon, perhaps certain stars – was deeply significant**. To plan earthworks on this scale, the Hopewell must have had **knowledgeable skywatchers** monitoring celestial events over generations. This suggests a belief that constructing their ritual spaces in accordance with cosmic events would harness celestial power or ensure harmony between heaven and earth. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Archaeologists propose that the Hopewell likely envisioned a **tripartite cosmos**: an **Upper World (the sky and what lies above), a Middle World (the earth where humans dwell), and an Under World (waters and what lies below the earth)**. This three-tiered cosmos is a common theme found later among many Eastern Woodlands tribes (and depicted in Mississippian iconography, as we'll see in the next chapter). Although direct proof from Hopewell sites of this ideology is circumstantial, several clues support it: [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Animal Symbolism:** Hopewell artisans crafted spectacular objects portraying various animals – eagles and other birds of prey, bears, panthers, serpents, and aquatic creatures. These often appear in contexts that hint at spiritual meaning. For instance, platform pipes (ceremonial smoking pipes carved from stone) were made in the shape of animals like hawks, owls, otters, frogs, and other creatures. In many Native cosmologies, birds are associated with the upper realm (sky), while water

creatures (like frogs, fish, turtles) connect to the lower realm (water/earth). The prominence of these motifs in Hopewell art suggests they recognized **spiritual clans or guardians** in animal form, representing different cosmic zones. A carving of a **thunderbird or raptor** likely invoked the powers of the Upper World (lightning, thunder, the sun's strength), whereas an **effigy of a serpent** or amphibian might invoke the Under World (water, fertility, the mystery beneath). One famous Hopewell artifact is a large sheet of mica cut into the shape of a hand with an open eye in the palm. Later, Indigenous symbolism sees a "Hand-and-Eye" as representing a portal between worlds (the open eye in the palm possibly indicating a seeing hand or a passage for spirit) – a tantalizing clue that **the Hopewell might have conceptualized portals or connections between cosmic realms**. [press.uchicago.edu]

- **The Sacred Circle and Sacred Square:** Many Hopewell earthworks are perfect circles and precise squares, some set in combination. In many cultural symbol systems, the **circle** can signify the unity of the heavens (or the cyclical nature of time), and the **square** or **four-sided figure** can represent the ordered earth (with its four cardinal directions). At Newark, a circle (possibly "sky") is directly linked to an octagon – an eight-sided figure, which might represent an expanded concept of space or an intermediate zone. Some scholars interpret the large circle as a representation of the cosmos or a "celestial sphere" and the square as the earthly plane. These giant shapes could have been ceremonial stages where rituals enacting the joining of heaven and earth took place. Indeed, some of the geometric earthworks seem deliberately paired (circle next to square), perhaps reflecting the meeting of cosmic opposites or complements in ritual.

Taken together, these features indicate a **cosmos that was carefully observed, mapped, and ritually integrated into Hopewell life**. We can imagine that the Hopewell believed in a world where **the souls of the dead traveled to the sky** (maybe via the path of the Milky Way, often called the Path of Souls in later lore), and that their earth ceremonies ensured those souls' safe passage and the renewal of the living world.

Spiritual Beliefs and Rituals: Hopewell society appears to have been less hierarchical than the later Mississippians – no evidence of kings or large-scale warfare has been found. Instead, what stands out is the evidence of **elaborate ritual gatherings and community feasting**. It's thought that the major earthwork centers (like Newark, Hopewell Mound Group, Seip Earthworks, etc.) were **ceremonial meeting places** rather than cities. People from many distant villages likely traveled to these sacred sites for periodic ceremonies, bringing offerings and participating in large rituals. There is evidence of **astronomical**

observation events (like gatherings at solstices or lunar standstill risings), which would have been times when priests or shamans led rites timed to those events. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

One central aspect of the Hopewell ritual was **ancestor veneration and burial ceremony**. At the earthwork centers, the Hopewell built **earthen mounds** that often started as "charnel houses" – wooden structures where the dead were laid out or cremated, and then those structures were burned or buried and covered with earth to form a mound. Inside these mounds, archaeologists found highly crafted grave goods: strings of pearls, copper plates shaped like animals, effigy pipes, carved stone tablets, shells from the Gulf Coast, obsidian from the Rockies, and mica from the Appalachians – a literal treasure trove from across the continent. The presence of exotic materials indicates *widespread trade* but also *spiritual significance*. Many of those materials had symbolic resonance: **marine shells** (from the ocean) likely symbolized water and the Under World; **obsidian (volcanic glass)** might represent lightning or the deep earth; **mica** has a reflective quality, possibly standing for the ephemeral or the sky reflection; **copper** gleams like the sun or blood, bridging life and illumination. [christophe…eology.com] [nationalpa…aveler.org]

The inclusion of these objects in burials suggests the **Hopewell had a concept of an afterlife journey where such items were needed or offered**. Perhaps they believed the soul traversed through various realms, and these goods were ceremonial tools or gifts to accompany that journey. For example, a **flint projectile point** might protect the soul or help it hunt on its journey; a **pot with food** feeds it; a **copper bird** might serve as a guide or a transformed state of the soul (like a soul taking flight as a bird).

It appears that there was a **distinctive leadership of shamans or holy people** in Hopewell communities. These individuals likely organized the major ceremonies and were skilled in the ritual use of those exotic objects. Some burial mounds are thought to contain these ritual specialists – identifiable by the presence of altars, effigy figurines, or headdresses in their graves. One example is the presence of **bear canine teeth pendants and claw necklaces** in some burials, possibly indicating a Bear Clan shaman or someone who took on the bear's spirit in rituals (bear often symbolizes healing and strength).

Ritual Life and Sacred Calendar: The alignments of earthworks to solstices and lunar events strongly indicate that **seasonal ceremonies** were a cornerstone of Hopewell spiritual life. We can surmise a yearly ceremonial cycle, something like: [nationalpa…aveler.org]

- **Spring**: Possibly ceremonies to celebrate the return of life – planting rituals, invoking rain and sun. This might coincide with the spring equinox (sunrise alignment at certain sites) or the dawn rising of a particular constellation heralding planting time.
- **Midsummer**: A gathering at the summer solstice (longest day) where the sun's power is at its peak. Some earthworks align with solstice sunrise/sunset, implying a festival of light or perhaps a time to initiate important rites of passage, like a renewal ceremony. [press.uchicago.edu]
- **Fall/Harvest**: While the Hopewell's subsistence included horticulture (corn was present, though not yet as dominant as in later Mississippian times), they likely held autumn ceremonies to give thanks for wild harvests and crops. An equinox alignment in fall might have seen a closing-of-year rite, possibly also a time where they buried the remains of those who died that year (ensuring they go to the spirit world as the cycle of growth ends).
- **Winter**: The winter might have been a quieter ritual period, though some mound constructions show evidence of being built in mid-winter (via soil deposition analysis), perhaps meaning a large funerary or renewal ritual took place around winter solstice – a time to hope for rebirth of the sun. In historic tribes, the winter solstice, in some cases, is actually the new year ceremonially.

Additionally, the unique **18.6-year lunar standstill cycle** alignment at Newark suggests an awareness that went beyond the annual cycle – possibly a belief in larger cyclical time, maybe a Great Year concept, where certain generations would witness the moon at its extreme and consider it a powerful omen time for extraordinary ceremonies. Maintaining knowledge of this cycle implies that a **priestly class had intergenerational continuity**, passing down knowledge for nearly two decades to hit the right moment. That moment (the standstill) might be when the moon appears to halt and reverse its rising point shift, possibly treated as a time when the **veil between worlds was thinnest or a cosmic balance was reset**. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Symbols and Visual Elements: The Hopewell artistic legacy provides many **visual keys** to their beliefs. Some of the most evocative symbols include:

- **The Great Serpent:** While the famous Serpent Mound in Ohio (a 400m-long snake effigy earthwork) is likely from slightly later (Fort Ancient culture, c. 1070 CE), recent research suggests it may have had earlier Adena/Hopewell influences. In any case, serpent imagery appears in Hopewell carved stones and copper. The serpent or **horned serpent** in Eastern Woodlands lore symbolizes the Underworld water spirit, fertility, and rebirth (shedding skin = renewal). If Hopewell people revered a serpent

figure, the winding coils of their earthworks could even be a form of "land serpent" imagery – some circular earthworks may represent the **Great Serpent biting its tail** (an ouroboros-like symbol of endless cycle).

- **Birds and Feathers:** Small copper cutouts of stylized bird claws or feathers have been found. A spectacular Hopewell artifact is the **"Copper Falcon"** – a sheet of beaten copper shaped like a stylized bird of prey's outspread wings. This surely had ceremonial use, perhaps worn on the chest or as a headdress piece of a dancer representing a sky deity or clan. Feathers, particularly eagle feathers, do not preserve archaeologically, but we find their imprint in art. Many tribes see feathers as carriers of prayers (due to their ability to soar). The Hopewell likely used feathered fans or feather-decorated costumes in their rituals, embodying the power of the sky spirits.
- **Human Effigies and the "Shamanic Persona":** A few stone figurines depict human figures, sometimes with animal attributes (one famous platform pipe shows a man's figure emerging from a bear's mouth, possibly depicting transformation or a shaman wearing a bear headdress). This aligns with a belief in **shape-shifting** or spirit helpers – shamans might don animal costumes to spiritually "become" that being during rituals. The existence of such effigies indicates a concept of **mediation** between worlds: humans could temporarily assume the form of sacred animals to communicate with the cosmic realms, ensuring community well-being (e.g., a shaman might "fly" in spirit as a bird to carry messages to the sky).
- **Geometric Motifs:** Hopewell artifacts often feature repeated geometric patterns – curvilinear scrolls, circles, crosses, and zigzags. A cross or X inside a circle possibly symbolized the four directions and the central fire or spirit (this symbol, common later, might have been incipient here). Zigzag lines often represent water or lightning; spirals might symbolize a journey or the revolving heavens. These patterns could appear on pottery, carvings, and textiles (textiles themselves only survive as impressions on clay, but show woven designs). Reading them, we sense an attempt to graphically capture forces of nature and cosmos: e.g., a wavy line for a flowing river (earth's blood), concentric circles for ripples or the layers of the world.

Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage: The distribution of exotic materials in Hopewell mounds indicates **long-distance pilgrimage or exchange**. Obsidian from Yellowstone in the Rocky Mountains, marine shells from the Gulf of Mexico, and mica from the Appalachian region, all gathered in Ohio, imply that either materials traveled through trade networks specifically to deposit in these mounds, or people themselves traveled from far regions bringing offerings. The idea of pilgrimage – journeying to holy centers with tributes – strongly fits a

religious paradigm. The large earthen enclosures (some akin to open-air ceremonial "cathedrals") likely hosted **multi-community festivals**. Archaeologist Dr. Bret Ruby describes these centers as the "**temples of a complex religion**" where people speaking different languages all gathered on sacred days. The atmosphere would have been one of shared spirituality: bonfires lit within earthen circles under starry skies, processions of figures carrying banners or effigies, and rituals perhaps of music (drums, bone flutes have been found), dance, and prayer connecting everyone to the cosmic order. [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Because the Hopewell did not leave records and their descendant lines are diffuse, there's a certain **mystery** that surrounds their spiritual life. Yet, the careful planning of their sites and the beauty and symbolism of their artifacts allow us to reconstruct a picture of a people deeply **attuned to nature's cycles and the heavens**. Their worldview likely taught that **by creating a landscape in harmony with the cosmos, they kept the world's order intact**. Each mound built and each ceremony held was an act of sustaining creation, of renewing the connection between the living, their ancestors, and the forces of the universe. [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu]

In summation, the **Hopewell cosmology and spiritual practice** can be seen as **a quest for alignment with cosmic harmony**: building exacting earthworks to mirror the sky's order, honoring powerful animal spirits bridging the realms, and uniting diverse peoples in grand rituals of life, death, and renewal. Even after the visible Hopewell sites were abandoned, these ideas did not vanish – they flowed into the spiritual systems of later cultures, leaving a legacy of cosmic consciousness on the North American landscape. [nationalpa…aveler.org], [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Chapter 4: The Mississippian World – Mound Cities and Cosmic Harmony

Historical Snapshot: The **Mississippian culture** (c. 800 – 1600 CE) represents the last great florescence of pre-Columbian mound-building societies in what is now the United States, and it marked a pinnacle of urban development and political complexity north of Mexico. At its zenith, the Mississippian world stretched from the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast and from the Carolinas to Oklahoma. It was not a single empire, but a patchwork of interlinked chiefdoms that shared a broadly common set of symbols, ceremonial practices, and agricultural lifestyle. Mississippian peoples built nucleated towns with central plazas and **platform mounds**, often topped by temples or elite residences, indicating organized religion and stratified society. The largest of these was **Cahokia**, near modern St. Louis, which at its peak around 1100 CE may have had 10,000–20,000 inhabitants, dozens of

mounds (including the 100-ft tall Monks Mound), and a Woodhenge (timber circle) likely used for astronomical observations. Other important centers included Moundville (Alabama), Etowah (Georgia), Spiro (Oklahoma), and Natchez (Mississippi). European explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries (e.g., Hernando de Soto) encountered some late Mississippian societies (like the ancestors of the Natchez), giving us glimpses of their beliefs. However, most of our knowledge comes from archaeology and early ethnography of descendant tribes. [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu]

Cosmological Framework: Mississippian cosmology was highly structured, often described by scholars as a **"three-tiered cosmos"** consisting of an **Upper World (Above Realm), a Middle World (This Earth), and an Under World (Beneath or Water Realm)**. Each level teemed with spiritual beings and forces, and maintaining balance among them was key to the Mississippian worldview: [en.wikipedia.org], [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Upper World (Above Sky):** This realm was associated with **order, stability, and light**. It was the home of the greatest deities, such as the **Sun** and possibly a **celestial Great Spirit**. In some later accounts (like the Natchez), the Sun itself was worshipped directly – the Natchez ruler was called the "Great Sun," indicating a living representative of the sun on earth. The Above World also included the **Thunderers** – often depicted as **Thunderbirds**, giant birds that cause thunder and lightning. These beings brought storms (crucial for rain for crops), and were considered powerful, generally beneficent but potentially wrathful if not respected. The **Morning Star** (associated with the planet Venus) also held importance; some researchers equate the "Morning Star god" with a Mississippian hero figure (sometimes called **Red Horn** in Siouan legends) who is linked to warfare and rebirth. **Upper World symbols** identified in Mississippian art include **sun circles with rays, forked-eye motifs (a falcon's eye pattern), and depictions of raptorial birds**. Colors like **red and white** were often linked to this realm (for instance, white for the brightness of day, red for the sun or for sacred power). [en.wikipedia.org] [press.uchicago.edu]
- **Middle World (Earth):** This is the tangible world of humans, animals, and plants – essentially the everyday natural world, which was seen as a mixture or balance of the influences from above and below. It was symbolically the **"center"** or axis bridging sky and underworld. Humans in the Mississippian belief had a role to play in keeping harmony between the forces from above and below through proper ritual. There are indications that Mississippian peoples saw **themselves and their settlements as the literal center of the world** (many tribes historically identify their village or mound as the world-center, echoing what we saw with the Osage and

as noted by scholars like Robert Hall). **Four cardinal directions** structured the Middle World. This is evident from how Mississippian cities were planned: key mounds and plazas aligned to the cardinal directions and solstitial sunrise or sunset positions, effectively creating a cosmogram (cosmic diagram) on the ground. The Middle World was also where the **life cycle of corn** and people unfolded, so it's associated with themes of **fertility, mortality, and renewal**. Of note, Mississippian iconography often shows **earthly creatures like deer, rabbits, and raccoons** as symbols of this realm (common, everyday animals). [press.uchicago.edu] [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Under World (Beneath Earth/Water):** The Under World was associated with **water, chaos, fertility, and the night/danger**. It included everything below the earth's surface, such as streams, lakes, and the great primordial seas. The prototypical underworld creature is the **Underwater Panther or Horned Serpent** – a mythic being, part big cat and part serpent, often depicted with horns and a long tail, living in rivers and caves. Underwater Panthers were powerful and unpredictable; they could cause floods or drown people, but they also guarded valuable medicines and brought fertility (since water makes crops grow). Another underworld figure in some traditions is the **Great Serpent** or various serpent monsters symbolizing the forces of the deep. The Underworld was linked with **the color black (for night) and the color blue/green (for water)** in many reconstructions. **Underworld symbols** in Mississippian art include **serpents, composite creatures like the Piasa (dragon-like monster), water motifs (spirals or ogee shapes representing portals into water), and the cross-in-circle or spiral, likely representing the watery portal or earth navel**. Interestingly, **frogs, fish, and water birds** appear as well, bridging between water and earth, and thus they are sometimes affiliated with the Beneath realm symbols. [en.wikipedia.org] [press.uchicago.edu]

Connecting these three layers was the **Axis Mundi** – an idea present implicitly in Mississippian towns. The **central earthen mound** (like Monks Mound at Cahokia) can be seen as the axis, literally elevating human ritual space toward the sky while rooted in the earth. Many tribes had an actual **sacred pole** or tree erected in their plazas. Archaeological evidence at Caddo sites (Spiro) and others indicates tall posts in mound centers—likely the remnants of such sacred poles. These **wooden poles (often cedar)** were cosmological markers: their base in the ground and height toward the clouds made them a link through all worlds. One chronicler noted that Southeastern tribes would carry a **"sacred fire"** from town to town and considered fire on the altar as a mini-axis (smoke connecting up and down). [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu] [en.wikipedia.org]

Spiritual Beings and Mythology: Within this three-tiered cosmos, Mississippian peoples recognized a pantheon or roster of mythic figures, many known from later oral traditions and evidenced in the art:

- **Sun and Fire:** The Sun was arguably the supreme life-giver. Some descendant groups like the Natchez directly worshipped the Sun with daily rituals. There were likely **sun priests** or chiefs who tended a perpetual fire symbolizing the sun on earth. The concept of a **"solar deity"** appears in many guises – for example, among Muscogee (Creek) people, there is *Hvshto* (the sun), who is honored as the source of warmth and growth. The act of **keeping a central fire burning** in the temple on the main mound was probably a ritual microcosm of keeping the sun's power present in the community. [en.wikipedia.org]

- **Thunder Beings:** The image of the Thunderbird – a mighty bird often shown with spread wings and sometimes faces or "forked eyes" on its wings – is prevalent. Thunder Beings could be seen as enforcers of cosmic law or patrons of warriors (lightning as a weapon from the sky). Weapons like the **chunkey stones** (discus used in a famous Mississippian sport) or war axes were sometimes engraved with lightning motifs, bridging warfare with the Thunder god's sanction.

- **Corn Mother (Old Woman Who Never Dies):** Agriculture was critical, and many Eastern tribes had myths of a corn goddess. The Cherokee, for example, speak of *Selu*, the Corn Mother. In Mississippian iconography, a recurrent character is the **Earth/Underworld fertility goddess**, referred to in some literature as the "Old Woman Who Never Dies," signaling the annually renewing corn crops. She resides in the lower realm (earth's soil) and ensures plant life regenerates each year. Shell engravings from sites like Spiro show female figures with plants or holding baby corn plants, possibly symbolizing this fertility spirit. [en.wikipedia.org]

- **Red Horn and the Hero Twins:** Certain figures from Siouan oral history (preserved by Ho-Chunk/Winnebago and others) seem to have Mississippian origins. One is **Red Horn**, a culture hero whose story involves contests with giants and demons and whose defining trait is having human heads or faces on his ears. Some Mississippian era artistic depictions (like a shell engraving from Craig Mound at Spiro) show a human figure with small faces on his earlobes – presumably Red Horn. Red Horn and his allies (sometimes called the **Thunder Twins** in myths) might correspond with Morning Star or hero-deities honored especially in war rituals.

- **Underwater Panther and Great Serpent:** These were feared and respected. Some Mississippian carvings (like the famous *"Wilbanks shell"* or other gorgets) show a

winged serpent or **feathered serpent**: A creature combining attributes of bird (upper world) and serpent (lower world), possibly indicating the necessity to unite opposing forces. The Underwater Panther is depicted on objects such as engraved whelk shells from Spiro – often identifiable by a long tail ending in a fork or plume, a feline head, horns, and sometimes a cross or sun symbol on the body, linking it to the cosmic order. This being could be appeased through offerings thrown in water and perhaps was invoked in initiation rites for certain priesthoods or warrior societies.

Religious Practices and Priesthood: Mississippian societies had a **priestly class or elites** who orchestrated ceremonies. The large platform mounds likely had **temple structures** on top, where sacred fires burned, and important rituals took place out of general view (perhaps restricted to priests and nobility). For example, at Cahokia's peak, the central plaza with Monks Mound was likely fenced by a stockade with watchtowers – a separation of sacred precinct. This implies an **organized state religion**, possibly with the chief as high priest. Indeed, many Mississippian chiefdoms seemed to be theocracies: the chief claimed divine descent (e.g., Natchez chiefs claimed descent from the Sun) and maintained power through ritual spectacle and redistribution of food. [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu]

Major Mississippian ceremonies probably included:

- **Green Corn Ceremony:** Celebrated among Creek, Cherokee, and others into modern times, this annual summer ritual of renewal and thanksgiving almost certainly has Mississippian roots. It involved fasting, the extinguishing and rekindling of the central fire, corn offerings, communal feasting, and forgiveness of grievances – essentially a spiritual reset for the community after the first corn harvest. The emphasis on renewing the sacred fire and celebrating corn's gift reflects Mississippian themes: honoring the sun (fire) and earth's fertility (corn mother). [press.uchicago.edu]
- **Funerary Rites:** Elite burials were accompanied by huge ceremonies. For instance, at Cahokia's Mound 72, a man (interpreted as a chief or priest, possibly a "Sun" or "Morning Star" figure) was buried on a bed of beads in the shape of a falcon, accompanied by sacrificial victims and wealth. This suggests an elaborate funeral representing the **death of a deity-king** returning to the cosmos – the falcon design shows the individual was identified with the sky/birdman deity. Human sacrifices, including retainer burials (people sacrificed to accompany the elite in death) and perhaps enemy captives, were part of Mississippian funerals, indicating a belief that

such offerings were needed to honor or carry the soul into the next world. [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Seasonal and Celestial Observances:** As at Cahokia, where evidence of Woodhenge (circular sun-calendar of posts) exists, the **solstices and equinoxes** were likely observed with rituals. The rising sun at equinox aligned with Monks Mound may have seen the chief (the divine Sun's representative) stand atop the mound to greet the dawn, with the populace assembled below in the plaza to witness and partake in a ceremony reaffirming cosmic order. Perhaps prayers or offerings were made to ensure the sun's continued favor. [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu]
- **Warfare and Fertility Rituals:** There is substantial iconography linking warfare to cosmology. The **"Birdman" figure** – a common motif showing a human with a bird headdress or wing-like cape – is interpreted as a warrior's incarnation of a sky deity. This is seen on objects like the **Rogan Plates** (copper repoussé plates from Etowah, GA), which show such figures with trophies (human heads). Societies likely had **war rituals** to bless warriors (painting them with sacred designs, invoking Thunderbirds for success) and **harvest rituals** to ensure fertility (dancing with turtle shell rattles, invoking water spirits for rain). The concept of **balance** extended to war and peace: some Southeastern tribes had separate "White (peace) Chief" and "Red (war) Chief" roles – a dual leadership possibly dating back to Mississippian times, balancing the need for both harmony and conflict.

Sacred Art and Objects: Mississippian art is replete with cosmological symbols, which were not just art but **active elements of ritual**:

- **Shell Gorgets:** These were round pendants carved from large seashells, often worn by elites. They carry some of the most iconic imagery – winged serpents, spider motifs, dancers, and cross-and-circle designs. The **Spider Gorget** deserves mention: It shows a spider often with a cross in its body, found in Missouri and Illinois sites near Cahokia. The spider is significantly possibly as the **bringer of fire** in Southeastern lore (Cherokee legend says the Water Spider brought fire to humans in a basket on its back). Thus, wearing a spider gorget could mean the wearer is aligned with the mythic provider of fire (civilization). [press.uchicago.edu]
- **Copper Plates and Effigies:** Copper was sacred and often worked into thin, elaborate shapes. Examples include:
    - The **Birger Figurine**: a carved stone statuette (not copper, but part of Mississippian art) of a woman with a serpent, likely depicting Earth Mother

with a horned serpent, symbolizing fertility (she's weeding a garden on the serpent's back – a powerful union of agriculture and underworld). [press.uchicago.edu]

    - The **Wulfing Plates** (Mississippian copper plates) display birdmen in dancing poses.
    - The **Etowah Rogan Plates**: showing the Birdman wielding a mace and trophy head – possibly a mythic narrative of a sky deity in battle.

- **Pottery and Figurines:** Mississippian pottery sometimes took effigy forms – kneeling figures, animal shapes, or pots with painted cosmological designs (sunburst patterns, serpents, etc.). Figurines like the famous *Duck River Cache* (Tennessee) carved stone statues of seated figures adorned with symbols, could represent ancestors or deities, used in temple contexts.

Everything from the **layout of a city** to the design on a warrior's breastplate was charged with meaning. A city like Cahokia, with its four plazas and central mound cross-aligned, its wood posts marking solstices, was essentially a **sacred landscape that mirrored the cosmos**. Living in such a city meant living *inside the myth*, daily walking through a planned cosmos, reminding inhabitants of their place in the universe and their duties. [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu] [press.uchicago.edu]

Finally, the Mississippian people conceptualized **society itself as part of cosmic order**. For instance, among historic Muskogean peoples (descendants of Mississippians), clans were often associated with animals (Bear clan, Deer clan, etc.), which ties humans to animal spirits, and the town square ground was divided into four quadrants for the clans or for peace/war divisions. At Cahokia, as noted by Hall via Zuni analogy, it's hypothesized that perhaps neighborhoods corresponded to cosmic segments (north, west, etc., each with a different function or affiliation). This is similar to Osage and others – again highlighting how widespread that cosmic mirroring was. [press.uchicago.edu]

Thus, Mississippian cosmology and spirituality permeated **every level of life – environment, leadership, art, subsistence, conflict** – all woven into a grand tapestry that sought to **preserve harmony between the forces of sky, earth, and underworld**. It was a dynamic system that, for centuries, guided the building of great monuments and the conduct of daily farming, only to be disrupted by the social upheavals before and after European contact. Nonetheless, its essence survived in many descendant Native cultures, in stories and ceremonies that are still practiced, like the stomp dances and the Green Corn rituals of the Southeastern tribes, which continue to echo the cosmic order first

carved into the earthen mounds of their Mississippian ancestors. [en.wikipedia.org], [press.uchicago.edu]

Chapter 5: Kanza (Kaw) Nation – People of the South Wind and the Great Spirit

Historical Snapshot: The **Kanza (Kaw) Nation** is a Plains people whose name "Kansa" means *"People of the South Wind."* They are part of the **Dhegiha Siouan language group**, closely related to the Osage, Omaha, Ponca, and Quapaw. Before European contact, the Kanza lived in what is now eastern Kansas, with villages along the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. Their lifestyle was semi-sedentary: they farmed crops like maize, beans, and pumpkins in their river villages during part of the year and hunted buffalo on the prairies during seasonal excursions. The Kanza social structure was clan-based, much like the Osage, and they had strong spiritual ties to the land and its creatures. By the 18th and 19th centuries, the Kanza, like other Plains tribes, adopted aspects of horse culture, but their core spiritual beliefs harkened back to earlier Woodland and Prairie traditions. We examine here the **pre-reservation Kanza spiritual world**, which is inferred from early ethnographic accounts, Kanza oral tradition, and comparison to their Osage kin.

Cosmological Framework: The Kanza conceptualize the universe as governed and enlivened by a single paramount spiritual force called **Wakȟónda** (often spelled Wakanda or Wakonda). This term is analogous to the Osage *Wah'Kon-Tah* and the Omaha/Ponca *Wakónda* – typically translated as **"Great Spirit" or "Great Mystery."** However, Wakȟónda is not an anthropomorphic deity; the Kanza viewed it as the **pervasive, all-powerful divinity that animates the universe**. One historical observer noted that for the Kansa, *"Wakanda is in the everything"*, an omnipresent life force. It manifests in the wind that blows (appropriately, since they are people of the wind), in the thunderstorms, in the growth of crops, and in human fortunes. [nativeamer...ribes.info]

Accompanying Wakȟónda, or perhaps as aspects of Wakȟónda, the Kanza recognized several **sacred powers often termed "Wakanda beings."** An ethnographic report from the late 1800s recorded that the Kansa (and Osage) acknowledged **"seven great Wakandas"**:

1. **Wakanda (as the overarching mysterious power)** – sometimes enumerated as the **"Upper World"** itself or the vault of the sky.
2. **The Sun** – the life-giving celestial body, addressed in prayers (often as a grandfather figure).
3. **The Moon** – a complementary power to the sun, associated with night, cycles, and perhaps feminine aspects.

4. **The Stars (Morning Star)** – specifically, the Morning Star is mentioned as a distinct power, indicating the importance of Venus in their cosmology too (likely inherited from earlier Mississippian or Caddoan influence).
5. **Thunder (the Thunder-being)** – representing the thunderstorms, seen as living agents (Thunderbirds).
6. **Earth (the Ground)** – the earth itself as a source of life and final resting place, mother of all.
7. **Darkness** – interestingly, "Darkness" is listed, suggesting that even night and the unknown have a personified sacred aspect.

These seven can be grouped: **Sky/Above (Sun, Moon, Morning Star, Thunder, Darkness)** and **Earth/Below (Earth itself, perhaps Water)**. It appears the Kanza indeed shared the widespread belief in a **dualistic cosmos**: things of the sky above and things of the earth below, all unified by Wakȟónda's presence. They likely conceived of the world as having the above realm (the *day sky* with sun and an *upper night sky* with stars and thunder beings dwelling in the clouds) and a below realm (earth, including surface and the waters/underworld). Unlike Mississippians, their focus was not on a structured, tiered cosmos described in art, but deeply felt in prayer and life. [press.uchicago.edu]

One might say the Kanza saw **sacred power in every direction and element**: the east, west, north, south winds; the sky, the earth; fire, water. Of these, **Wind** holds special significance to them – being "People of the South Wind" suggests a mythic origin or guardian tied to the south wind. Perhaps they believed that Wakȟónda communicated through the winds (a gentle south wind bringing warmth and growth could be a sign of blessing; a harsh north wind portended difficulty).

Spiritual Beliefs and Values: The Kanza held a deeply **religious worldview** in which virtually all aspects of life were connected to spiritual forces. A historical synthesis described them as *"deeply religious people who continually sought unity with Wakanda through symbolic expressions like sacred bundles, prayer, ritual, dance, and vision quests."*. This unity with Wakȟónda was the ultimate goal: to live in harmony with the Great Mystery and thereby enjoy health, plenty, and protection.

Several core beliefs stand out:

- **Humility and Reverence:** The Kanza believed human beings were dependent on Wakȟónda's will. Prosperity (good hunt, successful harvest, victory in battle) was not merely one's own doing but a sign that *"Wakanda has been looking at me,"* as a Kanza man would say in gratitude. There was no sense of entitlement; rather, every

good thing required an expression of thanks, usually in the form of a prayer or offering. Conversely, misfortune might be seen as a withdrawal of Wakȟónda's favor, prompting introspection and perhaps a need to conduct a ceremony to restore balance.

- **Animism and Spirit-Filled World:** Much like the Osage and other Plains tribes, the Kanza perceived that **every animal, plant, and geographical feature had a spirit**. Great beasts like the buffalo or bear had powerful spirits (perhaps even patron spirits for warrior societies); eagles and hawks, high-flying, were messengers of Wakȟónda; even seemingly inanimate things like stones or certain fossils could be imbued with spirit and thus used as talismans. They practiced what could be called **"respectful animism"** – for example, when a hunter killed a deer or bison, he would offer a prayer and maybe a bit of tobacco, thanking the animal's spirit for its sacrifice. They commonly spoke of animal helpers or guardian spirits that individuals might obtain through visions (someone might say, "the beaver spirit is my luck" if a beaver came in a vision and taught them something).
- **The South Wind and Weather:** As their name suggests, the winds had special meaning. The south wind in the Plains context is typically warm, coming from the equatorial regions, bringing spring or summer conditions. It might be personified as a benevolent being or even a cultural hero. The Kanza likely told stories of how the South Wind is their protector. There may have been **wind ceremonies** or at least a recognition in prayer of the four winds. (Among the Omaha-Ponca, closely related, the Four Winds are important spirits invoked at ceremonies like the Sacred Pole ceremony; it stands to reason the Kanza did similarly).

Ceremonial Life and Rituals: The Kanza engaged in numerous rituals, from daily individual practices to large communal ceremonies. Some known elements include:

- **Sacred Bundles:** The Kanza had **sacred bundles (wóbonaha),** which were collections of holy objects kept by certain clans or priests. A bundle might contain items like animal skins, special stones, feathers, or pipes, each symbolizing part of a myth or covenant with Wakȟónda. For instance, there may have been a **"Thunder bundle"** held by the Thunder Clan, used to pray for rain and to protect the people from storms. Indeed, a report notes that **members of the Thunder clan had the duty of placing green cedar on the fire at the first thunder of spring to ward off destructive storms**. This was an annual ritual: the rising thunderheads of spring (thought to be Thunder-beings arriving) were greeted with burned cedar (the fragrance pleasing the Thunder and asking it to pass over gently). That is a vivid example of ritual action tied to nature's cycle.

- **Prayer and Fasting:** Kanza religion emphasized personal communication with Wakȟónda. Besides group ceremonies, individuals (especially young men) undertook **vision quests**. A youth would go to a remote hill or secluded spot, fast from food and water, and pray to Wakȟónda for several days, seeking a vision or dream in which a spirit would reveal itself as a guide or protector. Such experiences were transformational, often resulting in the person receiving a sacred song or finding a sacred object (like an eagle feather dropped in front of them) that they would keep for all their life. Vision quest sites often became holy ground for that individual.
- **Community Dances and Feasts:** The Kanza held dances that were both social and spiritual. We have evidence that they participated in the **Calumet Dance** or **Pipe Dance** (common among Plains tribes for diplomacy and peace) – their word for peace pipe, *úppithă* (as recorded by early sources), was central in forging alliances, likely accompanied by songs and dances that sanctified friendships among tribes. They likely also had a **Buffalo Dance** to honor success in the hunt, a **Corn Planting/Harvest Dance** to ensure good crops, and various war honors dances where warriors recounted deeds (the Kanza, like other Plains tribes, had a "warrior society" structure with dances such as the Scalp Dance after victory, which carried spiritual thanks and sometimes mourning for the dead).
- **Sun Dance or Sundance-like Ceremony:** It's not clearly documented if the Kanza held a formal Sun Dance (as the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Kiowa did). Some sources suggest that the Kanza did **perform a Sundance in the 19th century** after relocating to Indian Territory, possibly adopted from neighboring Plains tribes. If any pre-contact form existed, it might have been simpler. However, given their connection to the Dhegiha group, which earlier had Earth Lodge traditions, the classical Plains Sun Dance might not have been originally theirs. Instead, their primary summer ceremony could have been a **different renewal rite** focusing on **Wakȟónda and water**. Some Plains Siouxan groups, like Omaha, had a "Sacred Pole" ceremony rather than a Sun Dance, which venerated a wooden pole representing the tribe's spirit – possibly the Kanza did as well, venerating a **sacred tree or pole** representing continuity of the people.
- **Healers and Medicine:** The Kanza had medicine men (shamans) referred to as *Wakóndagi* (which, interestingly, is similar to their word for certain spirit beings; perhaps meaning "possessor of Wakanda's power"). These healers performed ceremonies to cure the sick using herbal remedies combined with spiritual songs and sometimes dramatic acts like sucking "bad spirits" out of the patient. They

often kept their own small bundles of medicine objects and were respected and a bit feared. Healing ceremonies were often communal – if someone was very sick, the whole family and maybe clan would gather to support, with the shaman leading prayers to Wakȟónda and invoking the patient's guardian spirits.

Moral Code and Society: Kanza spirituality enforced a **strong moral code** anchored in respect for other people, for nature, and for promises. Oral tradition highlighted virtues like **generosity** (as wealth was seen as given by Wakȟónda to be shared), **courage** (especially for men in hunting and war, trusting Wakȟónda's plan), **chastity/fidelity** (for women, tied to the water spirit punishing unfaithful wives as Wichita lore mirrored, the Kanza too valued marital trust), and **truthfulness**. The concept of speaking or acting wrongly was considered not just a social fault but a spiritual danger.

They also had customs to avoid offense to spirits: for instance, if a fox crossed one's path, that might be Wakȟónda sending a sign – perhaps stop travel that day. Or if thunder struck a tree near the village, they might hold a quick rite to honor Thunder.

Sacred Places: For the Kanza, **the Kansas River, its junctions, and certain hills in their territory were sacred**. Historical records mention a hill called **"Blue Earth Hill"** (near their Kansas reservation) where they performed ceremonies. They likely had **sacred springs** or ponds for specific rituals (water for purification, similar to other tribes using sweat lodge and then cold water immersion – the Kanza did have the sweat bath tradition, which is both a cleansing and spiritual rebirth rite common across tribes). A sweat lodge would be built, prayer done inside with heat and steam, and songs to summon spirit help, then the participants would plunge into a stream – connecting to the Earth and Under World for renewal.

One particularly sacred element was the **pipe (nikica)**. Like other Plains cultures, the Kanza pipe was a means to seal oaths and commune with Wakȟónda through its smoke. They likely had tribal **Pipe Keepers** who safeguarded special pipes for large rituals (e.g., a pipe for peace treaties, a pipe for annual ceremonies).

Kanza Sacred Bundle Tradition

Community Medicine: The Kanza maintained *wóbonaha* (sacred bundles) filled with holy objects – such as animal hides, stones, and pipes – each symbolizing a part of their creation beliefs or covenants with Wakȟónda. Only designated bundle-keepers (elders or shamans) could open these bundles, often to conduct ceremonies ensuring the tribe's well-being (e.g., invoking the Thunder-beings to bring rain or holding a first-fruits rite for the corn harvest).

"Wind People" in Ceremony

Calling the Winds: As "People of the South Wind," the Kanza often incorporated the four winds into major ceremonies. In one spring ritual, at the booming sound of the first thunderstorm, Kanza Thunder Clan members cast cedar boughs into the fire, letting fragrant smoke rise to appease the Thunder-spirit and the turbulent spring winds. This act was a prayer for gentle rains and protection against storms – illustrating how deeply natural forces were woven into Kanza spiritual practice.

Interplay with Related Tribes: Because of their close kinship, Kanza cosmology has overlapping elements with the **Osage** (Chapter 1). Both revered Wakȟónda (Wah'Kon-Tah) and both had sky/earth clan divisions representing cosmic halves. The differences were likely subtle: Osage, living slightly east and more settled early on, kept a more formal dual organization; Kanza, a bit farther into the Plains, might have adjusted rituals to a more nomadic hunting schedule. But certainly, they shared stories – for example, the **Osage creation story of coming from the sky** might have been known similarly among the Kanza (given common origin). The Kanza might also have retained fragments of **Mississippian-era lore**, such as the Morning Star concept; the listing of Morning Star as a Wakanda power implies that star myth survived among them, possibly from ancient Cahokian influence, since the Dhegiha Sioux likely migrated from that sphere. [press.uchicago.edu]

Adaptability: Pre-Columbian Kanza spirituality, while robust, was not static. They adapted to new situations – for example, when horses arrived (around the 1700s via trade), they would incorporate horse medicine into their spiritual framework (e.g., ceremonies to bless horse herds, prayers by horse-warriors to their mounts' spirits). But at their core, they held onto the fundamentals: **Wakȟónda as a source of life, the need to live respectfully and bravely under Wakȟónda's eye, and the constant seeking of guidance through prayer, visions, and ritual**.

By focusing on the Kanza in the time before heavy Christian missionary influence (which came in the mid-19th century), we see a people whose **entire social fabric was woven with spirituality**. Whether carving a canoe, planting a field, or entering battle, the Kanza did so with ritual and prayer, believing absolutely in an **unseen world that interpenetrated the visible one**. They sought the blessing of Wakȟónda at every turn – and in that pursuit,

they demonstrated resilience. Indeed, when drastic changes came (smallpox, removals), many Kanza clung to their faith, performing the old ceremonies in the face of adversity, which is a testament to how deeply these beliefs were ingrained as the essence of what it meant to be Kaw.

Comparative Analysis: Shared Themes and Distinct Traditions Across the Five Nations

Having explored each of the five cultures individually – Osage, Wichita, Hopewell, Mississippian, and Kanza – we now bring them into comparative perspective. Despite differences in time period and lifeways (from ancient mound-builders to historic Plains tribes), there are **remarkable common themes** in their cosmologies and spiritual practices, as well as **notable distinctions** that highlight the diversity of Indigenous belief systems.

Shared Cosmological Themes

- **Sky Father/Sun and Earth Mother Motif:** Virtually all five traditions express a concept of **dual creative forces of sky and earth**. In Osage and Wichita origin stories, we see explicit parent figures – *Sun (Sky Father)* and *Moon (Earth/Grandmother)* – guiding humans to earth and gifting them essentials. Mississippian cosmology similarly has a Sun deity (with rulers even called *"Suns"*) and an Earth Mother/Corn Mother goddess. The Kanza speak of sky powers and Earth as one of the great Wakandas. This suggests a widespread recognition that life emerges from the **union of sky and earth**: the sun's warmth and rain from above fertilize the ground below, a metaphor translated into father-mother imagery in myth. [indianrese...ation.info], [The Wichit...Volume 19] [en.wikipedia.org]
- **Tripartite Universe (Above-Middle-Below):** The idea of a **layered cosmos** is pervasive. Mississippians articulated it clearly in iconography and legend (Upper World of orderly gods, Middle World of humans, Under World of chaotic water spirits). Hopewell earthworks align to sky events and contain underworld symbols, implying a similar tiered understanding. Osage and Kanza distinguish the sky realm vs earth realm in their clan systems and myths, and Wichita lore speaks of heaven above where spirits dwell, and an earth that went through a deluge (water chaos). In practice, this manifested as rituals oriented to the **four directions and the vertical axis** – for example, Cahokia's city plan aligning to cardinal points, Osage/Kaw villages bisected by an east-west road (horizon axis), and Plains ceremonies acknowledging sky (with upward smoke) and earth (with earth paint or burying offerings). All these reflect a **universal Indigenous concept**: that the world has

multiple interconnected levels and maintaining balance among them is a spiritual imperative. [en.wikipedia.org] [nationalpa...aveler.org], [press.uchicago.edu] [nativeamer...ribes.info], [press.uchicago.edu] [The Wichit...Volume 19], [The Wichit...Volume 19] [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Sacred Fire and Sun Worship: Fire** emerges as a sacred element across the board. Mississippians kept eternal fires in mound-top temples, linking them to the Sun's fire. Osage and Kanza prayers involve fire and smoke as a medium to carry intentions to the Great Spirit. Wichita legends of Water Spider or similar figures bringing fire exist in the Southeastern context (spider gorgets). In all these cases, **fire represents the presence of spirit** – a piece of the sun on earth or the spark of life. Likewise, **veneration of the sun/solar phenomena** is a repeated theme: Wichita and Kanza greet the sunrise with prayer; Mississippian societies oriented entire festivals (Green Corn) around the sun's cycle; even Hopewell's alignments to solstices indicate reverence for solsticial sun events. The symbolic logic is consistent: the sun is the most visible life-force, so honoring it means honoring the Creator's light. [press.uchicago.edu] [osagenews.org] [nationalpa...aveler.org]
- **Animal Spirits and Clan Totems:** All five cultures assign spiritual importance to **animals**, often linking them to clans or mythic ancestors. Osage/Kanza clans carry animal totems representing cosmic forces (Sky people clans = birds, Earth people clans = land animals, etc.). Wichita myths detail sacred roles of animals (e.g., the Deer taught them dance; Water Woman in the river; even spiders and coyotes appear in lore). Mississippian art is replete with **Birdmen, serpents, panthers, bears, and owl iconography**, indicating clan emblems or protective spirits. Hopewell buried elaborate **animal effigy pipes**, suggesting that shamans communed with or took on aspects of those animal spirits. This commonality underlines an **animistic worldview**: humans are not separate from nature but part of a society of beings, which includes animals as kin or teachers. Many tribes maintain that long ago, **animals and humans spoke the same language** – a teaching ancestral to all these traditions. Ceremonies often had participants don animal regalia (e.g., eagle feathers, buffalo masks) to ritually access those animals' powers. [nativeamer...ribes.info], [press.uchicago.edu] [press.uchicago.edu]
- **Directional/Color Symbolism:** A consistent spiritual technology is the assignment of **sacred colors and directions**. The Osage four-direction color scheme (East=red, West=black, etc.) mirrors broader patterns seen among Plains and Eastern tribes. Mississippians had color-direction associations (white/yellow for East, red for North, black for West, etc., though specifics varied). Wichita likely had such a

system embedded in their rituals (their use of four colors of corn – black, yellow, red, white – hints at a fourfold cosmology). The Hopewell, by virtue of earthworks open in certain directions and deposits of specific colored clays or sands at cardinal points in some mounds, also partook in this symbolic ordering. Using the directions and colors in ritual (such as dancing sunwise around a fire, or painting the body in quadrant colors) was a **way to engage the entire cosmos in microcosm** – a shared language of space and hue linking these diverse cultures. [indianrese...ation.info] [The Wichit...Volume 19]

- **Ritual Use of Tobacco and Pipes:** While not deeply discussed earlier, it's worth noting that **tobacco (and the calumet pipe)** appears in multiple contexts. The Osage and Kanza prominently used pipes for prayer; the Wichita also smoked ritually (the early French noted the Wichita and allied tribes smoking in councils). The Mississippian platform pipes continue in historic use by their descendants. Tobacco smoke, viewed as **sacred incense carrying prayers**, is nearly universal in Native North America. This is a subtle common thread that all five would have recognized: from a Hopewell shaman smoking an effigy pipe in a 1st-century Ohio mortuary rite, to a 19th-century Kanza chief smoking a pipe to seal a treaty, the underlying principle is the same – **smoke connects worlds**.

Distinctive Cultural Expressions

Despite these commonalities, each tradition has unique features shaped by environment, time, and cultural emphasis:

- **Societal Scale and Architecture:** One striking difference is the **scale of religious architecture**. The **Hopewell and Mississippians built gigantic ceremonial earthworks and mounds**, literally reshaping the landscape as part of their spirituality. Their ceremonies often gathered thousands and involved large-scale coordination (e.g., constructing a 100-acre Octagon to observe lunar standstills). In contrast, the **Osage and Kanza** did not create built monuments; their sacred "architecture" was social (clan arrangements, portable sacred bundles) and performative (dances, songs). The **Wichita** were somewhat in between: they had permanent villages, but their special structures were large council lodges and arbors, not earth mounds. This also reflects a difference in **sociopolitical structure** – Mississippian religion was state-organized and overtly displayed in cities, whereas Plains tribes had smaller, kin-based communities with spirituality woven into daily practice rather than massive public works. Neither approach is "more religious" – but the expression differs: **Mississippian spirituality is literally etched in the**

Earth; Osage/Kanza spirituality is carried in memory and practice. [nationalpa…aveler.org], [press.uchicago.edu]

- **Time Period and Continuity:** The **Hopewell** beliefs are inferred mostly from material remains, meaning we rely on archeology and later analogies. There is a possible continuity from Hopewell to later cultures (some symbols and mound practices carried into the Mississippian). But Hopewell lacks a direct known "voice." Conversely, **Wichita, Osage, and Kanza** beliefs are documented in historic times by Indigenous storytellers or early ethnographers, giving us direct narrative detail (like Wichita accounts of specific star deities, Osage prayers, and Kanza duties of clans). This means the latter have a richness of myth detail (names of gods, ethical axioms) absent in Hopewell. The **Mississippian** sits in between – partially interpreted by archaeology, partially by descendant myth (like the Red Horn cycle, or accounts of the Natchez Sun King). So, there's a difference in **source material** that influences how fleshed-out each cosmology appears in our book. The ancient ones we see through artifacts and must piece together; the recent ones speak to us through oral tradition. This, in fact, is why prioritizing **Indigenous voices** is so crucial – it helps animate the silent archaeological record with likely meanings (e.g., a contemporary Osage tale can shed light on a Mississippian symbol).
- **Agricultural vs. Hunter Focus:** The central sacred economies differ. **Wichita and Mississippian religions strongly revolved around agriculture**, particularly corn. Corn is divine (gift from Morning Star and Moon for Wichita, identity of Corn Mother for Mississippians). **Osage and Kanza**, while they farmed, put relatively more emphasis on the hunt and on war. Their spiritual calendar was tied also to buffalo migration and war path raiding cycles; e.g. they might have specific war honors ceremonies or winter hunting camp rituals that farming tribes didn't. The Kanza Thunder clan puts cedar on the first thunder – that's tied to the agricultural cycle (spring planting) but rendered in a hunting tribe's framing (focus on storms rather than planting per se). Meanwhile, **Hopewell's** sustenance was mixed horticulture and foraging; their rituals seem largely about burial and social alliance (trade/networking) and cosmic renewal, rather than directly ensuring crops or hunts (though indirectly likely for both). These economic differences shape emphasis: **agrarian cosmologies develop detailed harvest rituals and corn myths**; **nomadic or semi-nomadic ones develop elaborate hunting ceremonies and vision quests for individual power**. Yet both share the underlying gratitude to nature's providence. [en.wikipedia.org]

- **Human Sacrifice and Ritual Intensity:** A notable distinction is the presence or absence of **sacrifice**. In the Mississippian culture, evidence of human sacrifice in rituals (e.g., Cahokia Mound 72 burials) and possibly painful rites (like probable Sioux sun dance precursors) indicate a very intense mode of worship where even life might be offered to maintain cosmic order. **Hopewell** burials occasionally have suggestions of retainer sacrifices, but not to the scale of the Mississippian. **Wichita** (and Pawnee) had the Morning Star sacrifice into the 19th century – an extreme ritual to ensure crops (an example of how fervently they enacted their myth). On the other hand, **Osage and Kanza** in recorded history are not known to have practiced human sacrifice in ceremonies (their warfare was brutal, but ritual killing of captives as part of fertility rites isn't described; indeed, Osage cosmology seems to stress balance and would find such sacrifice outside a war context unnecessary). This difference speaks to how societies conceived their relationship to the divine: Mississippian chiefdoms apparently believed **blood was a potent offering** to the gods, whereas smaller-scale tribal groups managed renewal through dance, fasting, and offerings of goods or animals, not people. Underneath, the goal (cosmic renewal) is same, but the method diverges. [press.uchicago.edu]
- **Mythological Pantheon Complexity:** The **Wichita** pantheon, as recorded, is strikingly extensive (with named entities for nearly every natural phenomenon), which reflects a rich oral literature and possibly influences of both Caddoan and Christian cosmologies (some of the dual-gendered first couple echo Adam and Eve influence, as noted in their legend interpretations). The **Osage/Kaw** pantheon is less enumerated but equally profound – instead of many named gods, they have one Great Mystery with various manifestations. **Mississippian religion** sits in between with a handful of major figures (Sun, Thunder, Corn Woman, Red Horn, etc.) explicated by iconography, but because no Mississippian priest left a list, it's reconstructed. **Hopewell religion** is almost entirely reconstructed from symbols and later analogies, so we give them concepts (like Earth/Great Turtle or similar, which are guesses. Thus, the **texture of myth** differs: Wichita myths read almost like Greek mythology with multiple deities, while Osage thought is more monotheistic or pantheistic in flavor (one force, many faces). Neither is simplistic; it's a matter of emphasis in expression—**personification vs. abstraction**. This highlights the diversity: Indigenous spiritual traditions can be highly **polytheistic (Wichita)**, **monistic (Osage/Kanza)**, or **some blend (Mississippian)**, challenging any one-size-fits-all characterization of Native American religion. [The Wichit...Volume 19], [The Wichit...Volume 19] [The Wichit...Volume 19]

Interconnections and Influences

It's also valuable to acknowledge **historical and cultural linkages among the five**:

- The **Hopewell culture** set a foundation for later cosmologies by establishing the importance of celestial alignment and sacred landscapes in the Eastern Woodlands. Elements like a **Great Serpent symbol** or the practice of gathering from afar foreshadow Mississippian traits. Many Eastern tribes who descended from or replaced Hopewell peoples (Shawnee, Miami, etc.) retained veneration of meteors, thunderers, etc., feeding into the Mississippian milieu.
- The **Mississippian culture** influenced the **Osage and Kanza** directly as ancestral populations. Linguistic and oral tradition evidence suggests the ancestors of the Osage/Kaw were living near the Mississippian cultural centers (possibly Cahokia region) before migrating west around 14th-15th centuries. That could explain why Osage/Kaw preserved Mississippian ideas like Morning Star reverence and specialized clan cosmology. In effect, Osage and Kaw carried Mississippian spiritual knowledge onto the Plains, adapting it to a different life but keeping the core (e.g., sacred regard for the sun, four directions, etc.). [press.uchicago.edu]
- The **Wichita (Caddoan)** were part of the **Spiro/Caddo** Mississippian expression. Spiro Mounds in Oklahoma contained artifacts that match Wichita-Pawnee lore (like Morning Star engravings, spider gorgets, etc.). After Spiro's decline, the Wichita remained, and their beliefs echo that legacy strongly – for instance, the **Morning Star sacrifice ritual** of the Pawnee (close kin to Wichita) is thought by scholars to possibly originate from the **Mississippian Southeastern Ceremonial Complex** focused on Morning Star (some art pieces are interpreted as Morning Star as a warrior deity). Thus, Wichita cosmology is a **bridge between Southeastern and Plains** traditions – they share star and corn myths with the Southeastern (Mississippian/Caddo) and at the same time, roaming buffalo hunting elements with Plains neighbors.
- The **Osage and Kanza** are so closely related that their cosmologies are almost fraternal twins. Differences are minimal – mainly dialect and slight ritual variations. In a comparative context, they reinforce each other: both illustrate the **Plains Siouan adaptation of a woodlands cosmology** (the sky/earth clan system reminiscent of mound-builder town layouts, but applied to mobile village life). Studying one illuminates the other. [press.uchicago.edu]

Core-Important Information Recap

To draw the most salient comparative conclusions (ensuring the *core-relevant information* is prominent):

1. **All five traditions view the world as infused with sacred power and order, governed by a higher mystery (Wah'Kon-Tah/Wakȟónda or equivalent) and populated by spirit beings that personify natural forces**. The **Sun, Moon, and stars are universally significant**, often cast as divine or ancestral figures, reflecting a common sky-oriented spirituality. [nativeamer...ribes.info], [The Wichit...Volume 19] [en.wikipedia.org]

2. **Each culture developed its own way of aligning human life with the cosmos.** The **Hopewell and Mississippians built earthworks to map the heavens on earth**, orchestrating communal rites at solstices and equinoxes. The **Osage and Kanza structured their society and daily rituals to mirror cosmic dualisms and balance**, greeting the sun each morning and grouping clans by sky/earth orientation. The **Wichita embedded cosmic myths into their ceremonies and even their dwelling construction** (east-facing grass lodges, Morning Star and Moon ceremonies). In essence, **all pursued harmony between heaven and earth, but through different means** – monumental architecture, social organization, myth-ritual enactment, etc. [nationalpa...aveler.org], [press.uchicago.edu] [nativeamer...ribes.info], [press.uchicago.edu] [The Wichit...Volume 19], [The Wichit...Volume 19]

3. **Common symbolic threads** – the sacred fire, the four directions, the ceremonial pipe, the vision quest – act as a substrate that one finds in multiple cultures, indicating either ancient shared origins or parallel development. For example, the sanctity of the cardinal directions is as evident in a Cahokia plaza as in an Osage prayer song, and the act of smoking tobacco in supplication is as important to a Wichita chief as to a Kanza elder. [The Wichit...Volume 19]

4. **Distinct identity and emphasis** – each tradition highlights what was vital for its people's survival and identity. The **Mississippian chiefdoms emphasize cosmic kingship and fertility of corn (hence elaborate corn mother rituals and sacrificial stratagems)**. The **Plains Osage/Kanza emphasize relational harmony and bravery (hence their focus on maintaining balance via clans and seeking personal spiritual power via vision quests for success in war/hunt)**. The **Wichita, straddling farming and hunting, emphasize celestial providence and moral living (so they stress gifts of corn and bow from the stars and guiding life lessons from mythic narratives). The **Hopewell** seem to have emphasized communal ritual and death/renewal rites (their legacy is huge ceremonial sites for gatherings and complex mortuary offerings, pointing to an ideology where ancestral spirits and seasonal/star cycles ensured world renewal). [press.uchicago.edu]

[nativeamer…ribes.info] [The Wichit…Volume 19] [nationalpa…aveler.org], [christophe…eology.com]

In conclusion, examining these five rich cosmological systems side by side reveals the **deep philosophical common ground of Indigenous North American spirituality** – an understanding that **the cosmos is a living system and humanity must participate respectfully in its rhythms** – while also celebrating the creativity and diversity with which each nation expressed this understanding. From temple mounds to grass lodges, from engraved shells to sacred pipes, each culture left a legacy that speaks to the human quest for meaning under the great **sacred sky**.

Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts

Animism: The belief that all entities in nature (animals, plants, stones, weather, etc.) have a spirit or life-force. Common to all five traditions discussed, animism underpins practices like speaking to animal spirits or attributing personhood to celestial bodies. [nativeamer…ribes.info], [The Wichit…Volume 19]

Axis Mundi: A Latin term meaning "axis of the world." In cosmology, it's the central connecting link between the heavens, earth, and underworld. Examples: the cedar post at Cahokia's Woodhenge symbolizing the world-tree connecting realms, or the sacred pipe's smoke linking earth and sky. [en.wikipedia.org]

Corn Mother (Old Woman Who Never Dies): A fertility goddess prevalent in Eastern and Plains tribes, representing the spirit of maize and the earth's renewal. In the Mississippian context, she dwells in the Underworld, ensuring the annual rebirth of crops. Variants of her myth appear among Muscogee, Caddo, and Siouan peoples. [en.wikipedia.org]

Cosmogram: A symbolic diagram of the universe. For instance, **Cahokia's city layout** is a cosmogram with its plazas and mounds aligned to cardinal directions reflecting the order of the cosmos. Similarly, an Osage village bisected by an east-west road served as a cosmogram of the sky-earth division. [press.uchicago.edu], [press.uchicago.edu] [press.uchicago.edu]

Green Corn Ceremony: An annual late-summer thanksgiving and renewal ceremony practiced by many descendant Southeast tribes (Creek, Cherokee, etc.), involving the first ripe corn. It likely descends from Mississippian harvest rituals. Key aspects include lighting a new sacred fire, dancing, and feasting to honor the Corn Mother and Sun. [press.uchicago.edu]

Hopewell: An archaeological culture (ca. 200 BCE–500 CE) of the Eastern Woodlands known for mound building and long-distance trade. Named after a site in Ohio, it's not a tribe but a cultural pattern. **Hopewellian** refers to the artifacts (like platform pipes, mica art) and earthworks they left, used to infer their spiritual beliefs. [nationalpa…aveler.org], [nationalpa…aveler.org]

Morning Star: The planet Venus when it appears at dawn, often personified as a deity or divine ancestral figure. Among the Wichita (and Pawnee), Morning Star is the male spirit who with the Moon (Evening Star) created the first people and bestowed sacred gifts. In Mississippian iconography, a "Morning Star god" (sometimes linked to a figure named Red Horn or the Birdman) is associated with war and rebirth. Many rituals, like the Pawnee Morning Star sacrifice, were timed to Venus's appearances. [The Wichit…Volume 19]

Mississippian Culture: A broad term for the mound-building, corn-agriculture societies in the U.S. Southeast and Midwest (c. 800–1600 CE). Characterized by large towns, platform mounds, and an artistic "Southern Cult" or **Southeastern Ceremonial Complex**, which includes motifs of sun circles, falcons, and serpents signifying their cosmology. Cahokia is the largest known Mississippian site. [press.uchicago.edu]

Sacred Bundle: A wrapped collection of holy objects maintained by a person or lineage, used in ceremonies. Both Plains and some Woodlands tribes had bundles. For example, the Kanza Thunder bundle mentioned contained items to invoke Thunder Beings. Opening or using a bundle requires ritual purity and often specific songs. Bundles are tangible praxes encapsulating a tribe's spiritual heritage.

Vision Quest: A personal spiritual journey in which an individual, often an adolescent male, goes to a remote place to fast, pray, and seek a guiding vision from a spirit. Common among Plains tribes (Osage, Kanza, Wichita). The seeker hopes to be visited by a guardian spirit (which could appear in the form of an animal, person, or natural phenomenon) that grants them a song, name, or power. The vision quest reflects the highly personal aspect of Plains spirituality – complementing communal rites with individual revelation.

Wah'Kon-Tah / Wakȟónda: The Osage (Wah'Kon-Tah) and Kanza (Wakanda) term for the Great Mystery or Great Spirit that pervades all things. It signifies an unseen, formless sacred power rather than a single anthropomorphic god. Many Siouan languages have similar terms (e.g., Lakota "Wakȟáŋ Tȟáŋka"). It underlies a worldview that **the universe is one interlinked sacred entity**. [nativeamer…ribes.info]

Wichita (Kitikiti'sh): A Caddoan-speaking Indigenous people of the Southern Plains. In context, refers to their cultural and spiritual practices, especially their emphasis on celestial spirits (Morning Star, Moon, etc.) and horticultural rites. *Wichita* often also

encompasses affiliated bands like the Tawakonis and Wacos, who share the same cosmology. Their historic nickname “raccoon-eyed” comes from tattoo patterns, which had ceremonial importance.

Woodhenge: A circle of wooden posts used to mark sun positions on the horizon (akin to Europe's Stonehenge but with timber). Cahokia had several iterations of woodhenges to observe equinoxes and solstices. Its existence indicates the Mississippians’ advanced astronomy and how they built structures dedicated to tracking celestial time as part of their religious practice. [press.uchicago.edu]

Underwater Panther (Horned Serpent): A mythological monster common in Great Lakes and Mississippian lore, combining features of a feline (speed, power) and a serpent (water, sinuosity), often with horns and sometimes wings. In art, it represents the Underworld powers of water, danger, and fertility. Cultures from Hopewell through historic Algonquians revered or feared this being; ceremonies might be done to appease it (e.g., offering tobacco to water before canoe voyages). Mississippian gorgets depict it with a cross on its back, tying it to fire possibly, symbolizing the union of watery underworld with celestial order (fire). [press.uchicago.edu]

By understanding these terms and concepts, readers can better navigate the rich tapestry of Indigenous cosmologies detailed in this book. Each term is interrelated – e.g., an **animistic** view underpins the concept of **Wakȟónda**; the **vision quest** is a means to gain favor from a **Spirit (often an animal)** in an **animistic cosmos**; a **sacred bundle** might contain items representing the **Upper, Middle, and Under Worlds** – giving a sense of how integrated and holistic these belief systems are.

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