

THE BLACKFOOT CONFEDERACY SIKSIKA, KAINAI, AND PIIKANI

Beliefs, Traditions, and the Sacred Practices of the Northern Plains

*Napi — Old Man — made the world, left it imperfect, and walked away
north.*

The Buffalo is the center of everything that sustains.

The Medicine Bundle is alive. It breathes. It must be fed.

The Sundance — Okan — is the most sacred ceremony of the year.

The Thunder Medicine Pipe returns with the first thunder of spring.

*Isskinikssiyi — the transfer of sacred knowledge —
is how the sacred survives: person to person, heart to heart.*

Personal Reading Series • Haligricity • May 2026
I.Q. Productionz

CONTENTS

- A Note on Sacred Knowledge and This Document
- Introduction — The People of the Northern Plains
- Part One — The Three Nations: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani
- Part Two — Language, Territory, and Confederacy
- Part Three — The Blackfoot Cosmos: Structure of the Sacred Universe
- Part Four — Napi: The Creator-Trickster
- Part Five — The Sun (Naatos) and Moon (Kokomikeis)
- Part Six — Above People and Below People: The Spirit Hierarchies
- Part Seven — The Sacred Role of the Buffalo (linnii)
- Part Eight — Medicine Bundles: Living Sacred Objects
- Part Nine — The Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle
- Part Ten — The Beaver Bundle
- Part Eleven — The Medicine Pipe Ceremony: Step-by-Step
- Part Twelve — The Okan — Sundance: The Most Sacred Ceremony
- Part Thirteen — Sundance Preparation: What Happens Before
- Part Fourteen — The Sundance Ceremony: Day-by-Day Structure
- Part Fifteen — The Horn Society and Sacred Societies
- Part Sixteen — The Brave Dogs, Pigeons, and Other Warrior Societies
- Part Seventeen — The Vision Quest (Iniskimi Natosi Isttsikoyi)
- Part Eighteen — Sweat Lodge (Motokiks) Practice: Step-by-Step
- Part Nineteen — Iniskim: The Buffalo Calling Stone
- Part Twenty — Sacred Herbs: Sweetgrass, Sage, and Cedar
- Part Twenty-One — Birth, Naming, and Entry into the Sacred World
- Part Twenty-Two — Death, Mourning, and the Journey After
- Part Twenty-Three — The Transfer Ceremony (Isskinikssiyi)
- Part Twenty-Four — Blackfoot Astronomy and the Sacred Calendar
- Part Twenty-Five — The Haligricity Lens: Bundle, Transfer, and Living Sacred Objects

A Note on Sacred Knowledge and This Document

Blackfoot sacred tradition carries layers of knowledge — some of which has been shared publicly through academic collaboration with Blackfoot community members, some of which exists in the published ethnographic record, and some of which is intentionally protected within the community as knowledge that requires specific initiation, bundle ownership, or community standing to properly hold and transmit.

This guide draws on the extensive ethnographic and collaborative scholarly record — particularly the work of researchers who worked with Blackfoot elders' permission and guidance (including Clark Wissler's early 20th-century work with elder Weasel Tail, the more recent collaborative work of Blackfoot scholars, and materials shared by Blackfoot cultural institutions). Where ceremonies are described step-by-step, this reflects what Blackfoot community members and their scholarly collaborators have chosen to make available in the public record.

Specific sacred songs, the inner contents of active Medicine Bundles, and the most protected ceremonial knowledge are not repeated here — not because they are unavailable in some sources, but because the Blackfoot community's own determination of what is appropriate for outside engagement should guide what appears in a guide like this one. The Haligric practitioner approaches this tradition with the specific ethical orientation of *anekantavada*: receiving what is offered with genuine gratitude, without reaching for what is held back.

Introduction

The Blackfoot Confederacy — comprising the Siksika (Blackfoot proper), Kainai (Blood), and Piikani (Peigan, divided since the 1870s into the Apatohsippiikani/Northern Peigan in Canada and the Aamsskáápipikani/Southern Peigan or Blackfeet in Montana) — represents one of the most powerful, most culturally distinct, and most spiritually sophisticated Indigenous nations of the North American Great Plains. At the height of their territorial influence in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Blackfoot Confederacy controlled a territory of approximately 50,000 square miles extending from the North Saskatchewan River in present-day Alberta south to the Missouri River in Montana, and from the Rocky Mountains east to the present-day Saskatchewan border.

The Blackfoot are a people whose sacred tradition is centered on three foundational relationships: the relationship with the Above World (Spomitapiiksi — the sky beings, the Sun, the Moon, the Thunder), the relationship with the Below World (Sspommitapiiksi — the underwater powers), and the relationship with the Earth (Ksahkomiitapiiksi — the earth beings). Within these three relationships, the Buffalo (Innii) serves as the mediating sacred presence — the gift that sustains life and whose proper relationship embodies the entire Blackfoot ethical and ceremonial system.

This guide covers all three nations of the Confederacy — documenting the beliefs, ceremonies, sacred objects, and practices that are shared across the Confederacy as well as noting distinctions between the three nations where they exist. The Blackfoot language is used throughout for key terms, as the tradition is inseparable from the specific linguistic forms through which it is carried.

The Three Nations

Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani

THE BLACKFOOT CONFEDERACY — THE THREE NATIONS

SIKSIKA (BLACKFOOT PROPER): The northernmost nation of the Confederacy — their name means 'Black Foot People,' traditionally understood as referring to the blackened moccasins worn by those who walked through prairie fires or who blackened their moccasins with paint. The Siksika occupy the territory around the Bow River in present-day southern Alberta (Canada). Their reserve is located east of Calgary. Approximate contemporary population: 5,000-6,000. KAINAI (BLOOD PEOPLE): The largest nation of the Confederacy — 'Kainai' means 'Many Chiefs' in Blackfoot, referring to the traditional political structure in which many bands each had their own chief. The Kainai Nation (Blood Tribe Reserve) is the largest reserve in Canada by land area, located along the St. Mary and Belly Rivers in southern Alberta. Approximate contemporary population: 10,000-12,000. PIIKANI (PEIGAN): The southernmost and westernmost of the three nations — 'Piikani' is sometimes translated as 'Poor Robe People' (referring to those who did not tan their robes all the way through). The Piikani are divided: the Apatohsipiikani (Northern Peigan) are in Alberta (Brocket), while the Aamsskáápipikani (Southern Peigan or Blackfeet Tribe) are in Montana (Browning). The Blackfeet Nation of Montana has a reservation bordering Glacier National Park. THE CONFEDERACY: The three nations have been allied in a formal confederacy for at least several centuries — sharing language (dialectal variations of Blackfoot/Niitsitapi), sacred traditions, ceremony, and mutual defense. Despite their confederacy, each nation maintains its own political identity, its own band structure, and its own distinctive sacred practices within the shared framework.

The Blackfoot Cosmos

Structure of the Sacred Universe

The Blackfoot universe is organized into three interpenetrating realms — not separate levels stacked vertically (like some traditions) but three dimensions of the same world that are always simultaneously present and always in relationship with each other. Understanding this three-realm structure is the foundation for understanding everything else in Blackfoot sacred practice.

THE THREE REALMS OF THE BLACKFOOT UNIVERSE

SPOMITAPIIKSI (ABOVE PEOPLE): The sacred beings of the sky world — the Sun (Naatos), the Moon (Kokomikeis), the Morning Star (Ipissowahts), the Thunder (Ksiistsikomm), the winds, the stars, and the various sky beings who govern the forces of weather, light, and the cosmic order. The Above People are the most powerful sacred beings in the Blackfoot cosmos, and the Sun is their chief. The Okan (Sundance) is primarily directed toward maintaining and renewing the relationship with the Above People.

SSPOMMITAPIIKSI (BELOW PEOPLE / UNDERWATER PEOPLE): The sacred beings of the underwater world — powerful entities who inhabit the rivers, lakes, and springs. The most important underwater being is Soyii-tapi (Water Person/Underwater Person) — a figure of enormous power who appears in many forms and whose relationship with humans is ambivalent. Certain sacred medicines and powers come from the Below People. The Beaver Bundle (the most ancient of the Blackfoot sacred bundles) has its origins in the underwater world.

KSAHKOMIITAPIIKSI (EARTH BEINGS): The sacred beings of the earth — Napi (Old Man), the various animal spirits, the plant spirits, the spirits of specific sacred places (particularly the mountains, the coulees, and the buttes that mark the Blackfoot landscape). The Iniskim (Buffalo Calling Stone) is the most important sacred object associated with the earth beings. The Buffalo (Innii) belongs to all three realms in different aspects but is most centrally an earth being in practical terms.

Napi

The Creator-Trickster

Napi (Old Man) is the most important and most complex figure in Blackfoot sacred narrative — simultaneously creator, culture hero, and trickster. He is not God in the Abrahamic sense (that function belongs more properly to the Sun, Naatos) but the immediate creator of the physical world as it exists — including its imperfections — and the one who gave humans the specific knowledge and tools of Blackfoot life.

Napi the Creator

In the foundational Blackfoot origin stories, Napi emerged from the water in the beginning, when the world was covered in water. He sent animals below the surface to bring up mud, and from that mud made the land. He shaped the mountains, rivers, and prairies of the Blackfoot homeland. He made animals and plants. He made the first humans from clay — and when he was done, he declared 'I have made you,' walked north, and has not returned (though he is sometimes glimpsed, and his presence is still felt in specific sacred locations). The world he made is marked by imperfection — Napi made things incomplete or imperfect precisely so that humans would always have something to work on.

NAPI THE TRICKSTER — THE OTHER FACE

Napi is also the world's great trickster — lustful, greedy, foolish, and endlessly self-deceiving in the story traditions. He is tricked by animals, bamboozled by rocks, outwitted by Coyote, and generally demonstrates every human failing with exaggerated clarity. This trickster dimension is not separate from the creator dimension — they are the same being. The Blackfoot narrative tradition uses Napi's trickster stories to teach everything that the serious creation stories cannot: how not to behave, what happens when you let desire override judgment, how the world's powers will humble the pretentious. NAPI AND KIPITAKI (OLD WOMAN): Napi's counterpart — the Old Woman who, in the earliest stories, negotiates with Napi over the nature of the world they are creating together. Napi declares 'I will make everything'; Old Woman says 'You will make the decisions, but I will review them.' Their dialogue produces some of the world's most important features, including death: Old Man wanted people to live forever; Old Woman said 'No — if they lived forever, the earth would become too crowded and people would not appreciate their time here.' The dialogue represents the principle of balance — male and female principles in creative tension.

Part Five

The Sun (Naatos) and Moon (Kokomikeis) The Chief Above People

Naatos (the Sun) is the most powerful and most widely honored of the Above People — the being who governs light, life, growth, and the cosmic order. The relationship between the Blackfoot people and the Sun is not merely devotional; it is covenantal — the Sun makes specific demands (the Sundance/Okan is the primary expression of the human response to those demands) and provides specific gifts (health, hunting success, war victory, the continuation of life) in return.

The Morning Star

Ipissowahts (Morning Star — the planet Venus as the morning star) is the son of the Sun and Moon in Blackfoot sacred narrative — a figure who appears in several of the most important Blackfoot sacred stories, including the narrative of Feather Woman (Soatsaki) who married Morning Star and lived in the sky world, and whose return to earth with her son Poia (Scarface) led to the establishment of the Sundance. The Feather Woman narrative is one of the foundational sacred narratives of the entire Blackfoot tradition.

THE FEATHER WOMAN NARRATIVE (ORIGIN OF THE SUNDANCE)

A young woman (Soatsaki, Feather Woman) fell in love with Morning Star, who appeared to her and took her to live in the sky world with him and his parents, the Sun and Moon. She bore a son, Poia. She was told never to dig the large turnip near the Sun's tipi — but curiosity overcame her, and when she dug it, she saw through the hole to the earth below. Overcome with homesickness, she was sent back to earth in punishment, lowered through the hole on a cord. On earth, she died of grief. Her son Poia — marked on his face by a scar — was raised by his grandmother. When he came of age, he traveled to the Sun's lodge to ask the Sun to remove his scar (so that the woman he loved would accept him). The Sun agreed, on the condition that Poia return to the Blackfoot people and teach them the ceremony of the Okan (Sundance) — specifically the specific form of the ceremony honoring the Sun. Poia returned, taught the ceremony, removed his scar, and then returned to the sky world where he became the second morning star. THE TEACHING: The Feather Woman narrative establishes several key Blackfoot principles: the cost of breaking sacred obligations (Feather Woman's transgression); the importance of the Sun's covenant with the Blackfoot people; the Okan as a direct gift from the Sun to the people; and the sacred role of women as the primary vow-makers in the Sundance ceremony.

Part Seven

The Sacred Role of the Buffalo (Iinnii) The Center of Everything

The Buffalo (Iinnii — also written Iinii) is not merely a food source for the Blackfoot — it is the sacred being whose relationship with the Blackfoot people constitutes the fundamental sacred covenant of Blackfoot life. The Buffalo gave the Blackfoot everything: food, clothing, shelter, tools, sacred medicines, and the specific forms of knowledge that made Blackfoot life possible on the northern plains. In return, the Blackfoot honored the Buffalo through specific ceremonies, specific hunting protocols, and the proper treatment of Buffalo remains that maintained the relationship's integrity.

THE BUFFALO IN BLACKFOOT SACRED LIFE

THE BUFFALO AS SACRED GIFT: In Blackfoot sacred narrative, the Buffalo chose to give themselves to the people — the relationship is not one of predation but of sacred exchange. The Buffalo spirit (the spiritual essence of the species, not individual animals) made a covenant with the Blackfoot people: the people would treat the Buffalo with proper respect (using everything, offering prayers and tobacco, conducting specific ceremonies), and the Buffalo would continue to offer themselves. Violating this covenant — wasting Buffalo remains, hunting without ceremony, taking more than needed — risked the Buffalo withdrawing.

THE BUFFALO JUMP (PISHKUN): The most dramatic traditional hunting method — driving a herd over a cliff after elaborate preparation. Before the drive, specific ceremonies were conducted: the sacred pipe was smoked, prayers were offered, and the Iniskim (Buffalo Calling Stone) was used in ceremony to invite the Buffalo to give themselves. A specific person served as the 'caller' — someone whose sacred relationship with the Buffalo gave them the ability to lure the herd toward the jump. After the drive, specific rituals of thanks and distribution governed how the animals were used.

THE COMPLETE USE IMPERATIVE: Every part of the Buffalo had its sacred and practical use — hide for clothing and tipi covers, meat for food (fresh, dried, pemmican), bones for tools and needles, sinew for thread and bowstrings, stomach for cooking vessels, bladder for water bags, hooves for glue, tail for fly whisks, chips for fuel. Using everything was not merely practical efficiency; it was sacred obligation — the expression of gratitude and respect that the covenant required.

THE BUFFALO'S DISAPPEARANCE: The near-extirmination of the Buffalo by Euro-American hunters in the 1870s-1880s was not merely an ecological catastrophe for the Blackfoot — it was the destruction of the central sacred relationship of their entire way of life. The Blackfoot call the winter of 1883-84 'the Starvation Winter' — when approximately one-quarter of the Blackfoot population died of starvation following the Buffalo's disappearance. This was not a natural disaster; it was the deliberate erasure of the Blackfoot's sacred covenant with the land.

Medicine Bundles

Living Sacred Objects

Medicine Bundles (Natoas — the term varies by specific bundle type) are the most distinctive and most sacred objects in Blackfoot material culture — wrapped collections of sacred items (animal skins, feathers, stones, plant medicines, sacred objects) each with its own origin story, its own spirit owner, its own specific ceremonies, and its own living relationship with its human custodian. A Medicine Bundle is not merely a container of sacred objects; it is itself a sacred being.

The Living Bundle

The Blackfoot understanding of a Medicine Bundle as alive is not metaphorical. A Bundle has its own spirit, its own personality, its own needs and preferences. It must be fed (offerings placed near it), kept in specific conditions (wrapped in specific ways, housed in specific positions in the tipi), opened at specific times (not whenever the owner wishes, but when the Bundle's own ceremonial calendar requires), and treated with the specific protocols established in its founding story. A Bundle that is neglected — not properly fed, not opened at the right times, not treated according to its specific requirements — may express its dissatisfaction through misfortune in the custodian's family.

HOW MEDICINE BUNDLES ARE ACQUIRED AND TRANSFERRED

ORIGIN: Each Bundle has a specific origin story in which the Bundle's constituent objects were given to a person by a sacred being — a spirit animal, a sky being, an underwater being — along with the specific songs, prayers, and protocols for the Bundle's use. This origin narrative is an essential part of the Bundle's sacred power. CUSTODY: Bundles are owned by specific individuals — but 'ownership' is better understood as 'custodianship.' The Bundle belongs to its spirit, not to the human who holds it. The human custodian has the privilege and the obligation of caring for the Bundle according to its requirements. TRANSFER (ISSKINIKSSIYI): Bundles are formally transferred from one custodian to another through the Transfer Ceremony — one of the most important ceremonies in Blackfoot sacred life. The transfer is not a sale; it is a sacred transmission of the Bundle's knowledge, obligations, and power. The new custodian must learn the Bundle's songs, prayers, and protocols from the previous custodian through a specific ceremonial process. THE BUNDLE SYSTEM AS KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION: The entire system of Bundle custody and transfer is the primary mechanism through which sacred knowledge is transmitted across generations in Blackfoot culture. Each Bundle carries specific sacred knowledge that can only be transmitted through the formal transfer process — not read from a book, not learned from observation alone, but received person-to-person through the sacred ceremony.

Part Nine

The Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle The Pipe That Returns Each Spring

The Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundles (Motoki or Ninaimsskaan — Thunder Pipe) are among the most sacred objects in Blackfoot tradition — pipe bundles whose spirit is directly connected to the Thunder Being (Ksiistsikomm), and whose ceremonial cycle is governed by thunder itself. The Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundles sleep through winter and are awakened by the first thunder of spring.

The Origin Story

In the foundational narrative, a man named Akay-nehka-siim was carried to the sky world by the Thunder Being. In the sky world, he learned the specific ceremonies, songs, and protocols of the Thunder Medicine Pipe. The Thunder Being gave him a pipe with specific instructions for its use, and sent him back to the Blackfoot people with the knowledge of how to conduct the ceremony. The Thunder Medicine Pipe is thus a direct gift from the Thunder Being to the Blackfoot people — and the ceremony of the Thunder Medicine Pipe is the specific response the people give in gratitude.

THE THUNDER MEDICINE PIPE CEREMONY — STRUCTURE

THE AWAKENING (SPRING): The Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle is formally unwrapped and opened for the first time each year in response to the first thunder of spring. The first thunder is understood as the Thunder Being's return — and the ceremony that follows is the people's welcome of the Thunder's return. STEP 1 — THE HEARING OF THUNDER: When the first thunder of spring is heard, the Bundle owner (and traditionally any person who has made a vow to the Thunder during the previous year) must begin the ceremony immediately. The hearing of thunder is not a convenient time; it is the ceremony's trigger regardless of what else is happening. STEP 2 — CALLING THE CEREMONIAL COMMUNITY: The Bundle owner sends for the people who will participate in the ceremony — those who have Bundle-related obligations, those who have made vows, and the ceremonial helpers. STEP 3 — THE SWEAT LODGE (PURIFICATION): Before the main ceremony, a purification sweat lodge ceremony is conducted — preparing the participants to be in proper sacred relationship with the Thunder Medicine Pipe. STEP 4 — THE OPENING OF THE BUNDLE: The Bundle is opened with specific songs and prayers — each wrapping layer removed according to specific protocol, with specific songs for each layer. The opening is a ceremony in itself, not merely preparation for the main ceremony. STEP 5 — THE PIPE SMOKED: The Thunder Medicine Pipe is smoked — offered first to the four directions, to the Above, and to the Below, then smoked by the participants. The specific order of smoking, the specific movements, and the specific songs accompany each action. STEP 6 — THE SONGS AND DANCES: Specific songs belonging to the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle are sung throughout the ceremony. Specific dances accompany specific songs. Each song was received from the Thunder Being and must be sung in its correct form. STEP 7 — THE FEAST: A communal feast is held — the sharing of food is both a sacred act (food offered to the spirit of the Bundle) and a community celebration of the Thunder's return. STEP 8 — THE CLOSING: The Bundle is carefully rewrapped in its specific order, with specific prayers for each layer. The ceremony closes with specific prayers of gratitude to the Thunder Being.

The Beaver Bundle

The Most Ancient of Sacred Objects

The Beaver Bundle (Ksikstaki Natoas) is generally considered the most ancient and most comprehensive of all Blackfoot sacred bundles — a massive collection of animal skins, plants, and sacred objects that constitutes a complete sacred encyclopedia of Blackfoot botanical and zoological knowledge, and whose ceremonies encompass a complete sacred calendar aligned with the movements of specific star groups.

The Beaver Bundle as Sacred Calendar

The Beaver Bundle's ceremonial cycle is structured around the rising and setting of specific constellation groups — particularly the Pleiades. The Beaver Bundle ceremony is performed throughout the winter months, with specific songs for each animal in the Bundle performed in sequence as the Pleiades move across the sky. The Bundle effectively contains the entire Blackfoot sacred year in miniature — its ceremonial cycle is the Blackfoot sacred calendar made material.

THE BEAVER BUNDLE — CONTENTS AND MEANING

THE PHYSICAL CONTENTS: The Beaver Bundle is massive — it contains the skins of numerous animals (beaver, otter, mink, weasel, and many others), plant medicines, and sacred objects, all wrapped in specific order with specific protocols for their arrangement. Each animal in the Bundle has its own specific song and its own specific sacred role. THE BOTANICAL KNOWLEDGE: The Beaver Bundle is the primary repository of Blackfoot plant knowledge — the specific medicinal and ceremonial uses of the plants in the Blackfoot homeland are carried in the Bundle's ceremonial songs and protocols. This plant knowledge — accessible only through the Bundle's formal ceremonial context — represents a complete pharmacological and ecological encyclopedia of the northern plains. THE ORIGIN: In the foundational narrative, the Beaver Bundle was received from the Beaver Being of the underwater world — the most ancient of the sacred beings, who gave the Bundle to the Blackfoot people as the most complete possible gift of sacred knowledge. The Bundle's underwater origin connects it to the Sspommitapiiksi (Below People) and makes it the primary link between the Blackfoot and the underwater powers. THE BEAVER BUNDLE CEREMONY TIMING: The ceremony is performed from late fall through winter — while the stars of the Pleiades are visible in the evening sky. As specific constellation groups rise and set through the winter nights, specific sections of the Beaver Bundle ceremony are performed, making the ceremony a continuous engagement with the sky's movement across the winter months.

The Okan — Sundance The Most Sacred Ceremony

The Okan (sometimes written Okaan — the Sundance in English, though this English name is an outsider's description rather than a Blackfoot term) is the most important ceremony of the Blackfoot sacred year — the great summer ceremony in which the entire Confederacy gathers, in which sacred vows made to the Sun throughout the preceding year are fulfilled, and in which the foundational covenant between the Blackfoot people and the Above People (particularly the Sun) is renewed.

Who Initiates the Okan

In the Blackfoot Okan, the central role is held not by a male priest or chief but by a woman — specifically, a woman of impeccable moral character who has made a vow to the Sun to sponsor the Okan. This vow is typically made during a crisis (a husband's serious illness, a battle, a dangerous childbirth) when the woman pledges to sponsor the Okan if the Sun will grant her prayer. The woman who fulfills this vow is called the Natoas (Sun Woman or Medicine Woman) and her sacred responsibility is the foundational organizing principle of the entire ceremony.

THE OKAN'S SACRED SIGNIFICANCE

THE RENEWAL OF COVENANT: The Okan is the Blackfoot people's primary annual act of sacred covenant renewal — the ceremony through which the relationship between the people and the Sun (established in the Feather Woman narrative) is affirmed, the people's gratitude for the Sun's gifts is expressed, and the Sun's continued blessings are sought for the coming year.

HEALING: The Okan is the most powerful healing ceremony in the Blackfoot sacred calendar — many who come to the Okan come specifically seeking healing for themselves or their family members. The proximity to the Sun's power, concentrated in the ceremony, is understood as the most effective available healing force.

THE GATHERING FUNCTION: The Okan is traditionally the occasion for the annual gathering of the entire Blackfoot Confederacy — bands that have been dispersed across the plains through the spring and summer's hunting come together for the Okan. The ceremony is therefore simultaneously a sacred event and the primary social occasion of the Blackfoot year.

THE VOW SYSTEM: The Okan's continuation across generations is sustained by the vow system — individuals who are healed through the Okan, or who receive the Sun's assistance during the year, make vows to give-away, to participate in the Okan, or (for women of sufficient standing) to sponsor the Okan. These vows create an ongoing web of sacred obligation that ensures the ceremony's continuation.

Sundance Preparation What Happens Before

THE OKAN PREPARATION — COMPLETE SEQUENCE

THE NATOAS WOMAN'S PREPARATION (MONTHS BEFORE): The woman who has vowed to sponsor the Okan begins specific preparation months in advance. She must be a woman of demonstrated virtue — her character is publicly known and publicly acknowledged, and in earlier times there was a public declaration of her virtue by her husband and community. She begins gathering specific materials and foods that will be needed for the ceremony. THE GATHERING OF THE CONFEDERACY (1-2 WEEKS BEFORE): In the days and weeks before the ceremony, bands of all three nations travel to the gathering site. The arrival of each band is conducted with specific protocol — ceremonial dress, specific songs of arrival, and the formal arrangement of camp in the traditional circle pattern with each band's designated position. THE NATOAS BUNDLE TRANSFER: Before the Okan can begin, the sponsoring woman must receive the Natoas Bundle — the specific sacred bundle associated with the Okan ceremony — through the formal Transfer Ceremony from its previous custodian. This transfer may take an entire day and constitutes the formal beginning of the Okan's preparatory period. THE GATHERING OF SACRED MATERIALS: Throughout the preparatory period, specific materials are gathered for the ceremony — particularly the center pole (a cottonwood tree, which must be selected, cut, and transported with specific ceremony) and the materials for the Okan Lodge itself. THE CENTER POLE CEREMONY (THE DAY BEFORE): The cottonwood tree that will serve as the center pole of the Okan Lodge is selected and ceremonially cut. The cutting is conducted by a person of specific sacred standing — in some accounts, a war honor is required for the person who strikes the first blow. The pole is then carried to the ceremony site with specific songs and carried only by people with specific sacred qualifications. The branch forks at the top of the pole are the location where specific sacred objects will be placed.

The Sundance Ceremony

Day-by-Day Sacred Structure

THE OKAN — CEREMONIAL SEQUENCE

DAY ONE — THE RAISING OF THE CENTER POLE: The most dramatic moment of the Okan — the center pole is raised and set into the prepared hole at the center of the dance arbor. Before raising, specific sacred objects (buffalo tongue, sacred medicines, and specific offerings) are placed at the base of the hole. The raising is accompanied by specific songs and is performed with specific ceremonial personnel in designated roles. Once raised, the pole stands as the axis connecting the earth to the Sun above — the physical axis mundi of the ceremony. THE OKAN LODGE CONSTRUCTION: The ceremonial arbor is constructed around the center pole — a circular structure with the center pole at the center, its roof covering radiating outward like spokes from the center, open to the sky at the center where the pole rises. This structure is not merely functional; it is a model of the Blackfoot cosmos. THE NATOAS WOMAN'S CEREMONY: Throughout the ceremony, the sponsoring Natoas Woman occupies a specific sacred position in the Okan Lodge and conducts specific prayers, offerings, and ceremonial actions that are the spiritual core of the entire ceremony. She does not eat or drink for specific periods; she maintains a sustained state of sacred attention and prayer that is the engine of the ceremony's power. THE SACRED TONGUES: Buffalo tongue (dried and prepared in advance) is the sacred food of the Okan — distributed and consumed as part of specific ceremonial moments. The tongue is the most sacred part of the Buffalo, and its ritual consumption is a direct communion with the Buffalo's sacred power. THE DANCES: Men and women dance in the Okan Lodge — facing the Sun, moving in specific patterns, fulfilling specific vows through their dancing. The dance is not entertainment; it is the physical form of prayer, the body's offering to the Sun. THE PIERCINGS (HISTORICALLY): Historically, some men fulfilled vows by undergoing piercing — having skewers of wood or bone pushed through the skin of their chest or back, attached to the center pole by thongs, and then pulling back against the tether until the skewers tore through. This practice — later prohibited by the Canadian and US governments as part of the systematic suppression of Indigenous ceremony — was understood as the highest possible form of personal sacrifice to the Sun, the ultimate expression of the vow. It has been revived in some communities as part of the broader ceremonial revival.

The Vision Quest Going to Seek Power

The Vision Quest (sometimes called 'going to seek power' or 'fasting for a vision' — the Blackfoot term varies) is the individual spiritual practice through which a person seeks direct communication with the sacred beings of the above, below, and earth worlds, asking for guidance, for power, for a sacred ally, and for the specific knowledge and songs that will become the foundation of their personal sacred life.

The Vision Quest as Training Ground

The Vision Quest is the fundamental mechanism through which individual Blackfoot people develop their personal sacred relationship — the relationship that determines what Medicine Bundles they will eventually be connected with, what sacred songs they will receive, what role they will play in the community's ceremonial life. Almost every significant sacred role in Blackfoot society has its ultimate foundation in a vision or dream received during a vision quest or during a critical moment of danger or illness.

THE VISION QUEST — STEP-BY-STEP PROTOCOL

STEP 1 — THE DECISION AND MENTOR: A person seeking a vision first approaches a senior sacred practitioner who has themselves received visions and who can guide the preparation. This mentor provides specific instructions tailored to the individual — when to go, where to go, what preparation is needed, and what specific protocols to follow. STEP 2 — PURIFICATION (SWEAT LODGE): Before going to the vision quest site, the seeker undergoes one or more sweat lodge ceremonies — clearing the body and mind of ordinary contamination and opening the seeker to sacred communication. STEP 3 — THE OFFERING PREPARATION: Specific offerings are prepared — particularly tobacco, which is the most universally used sacred offering plant in Blackfoot tradition. Sacred paints may also be prepared for body painting at the vision quest site. STEP 4 — THE APPROACH: The seeker goes alone to the vision quest site — typically a prominent geographic feature (a hilltop, a butte, a cliff face) in the landscape. The approach is conducted in silence and prayer. The seeker may be accompanied partway by the mentor, who sends them off with specific prayers. STEP 5 — THE FAST: At the vision quest site, the seeker remains for up to four days and nights without food or water — maintaining a state of continuous prayer and openness to the sacred. They do not sleep (or try not to) — maintaining wakefulness as the most complete form of openness and as the condition that makes vision most accessible. STEP 6 — THE SACRED ENCOUNTER: The sacred experience may come in many forms — a direct vision, a dream during a brief sleep, an animal appearing and speaking, a feeling of overwhelming sacred presence, or specific songs arising in the mind. The specific form the vision takes is the sacred being's choice, not the seeker's. STEP 7 — THE RETURN AND THE TELLING: The seeker returns to the camp and reports their experience to the mentor. The mentor helps interpret the vision's meaning, identifies what spirit alliance has been established, and prescribes any specific actions the vision requires. STEP 8 — THE SACRED MATERIALS: If the vision included specific instructions for sacred objects (a specific feather, a specific stone, a specific plant), the seeker gathers those materials and begins the process of establishing their personal sacred relationship with the power that appeared to them.

Sweat Lodge (Motokiks)

The Foundational Purification Practice

The Sweat Lodge (Motokiks — the Blackfoot term; also called by various names across different nations) is the most regularly practiced and most broadly used purification ceremony in the Blackfoot tradition — used as preparation for virtually every other sacred practice (before the Okan, before the vision quest, before Bundle ceremonies, before important undertakings), as a healing practice in its own right, as a prayer ceremony, and as a community gathering focused on spiritual renewal.

THE SWEAT LODGE — PREPARATION (STEPS 1-5)

STEP 1 — BUILDING THE LODGE FRAME: A dome-shaped frame of willow branches — typically 10-16 branches bent in arcs and lashed at the top. The door opening faces east — toward the rising sun. The frame is covered with canvas (formerly hides) to trap heat and steam. STEP 2 — PREPARING THE FIRE AND STONES: A fire is built nearby to heat the stones (traditionally quartzite or granite). The stones — called 'grandfathers' — are placed in the fire and heated for one to two hours until red-hot. They are ancient, they carry the earth's heat, and they are addressed with respect. STEP 3 — THE GATHERING AND PROTOCOL: Participants gather outside the lodge. The conductor instructs participants on the protocols specific to this ceremony. Typically men and women sweat separately or in specific designated arrangements. STEP 4 — SMUDGING: Before entering, participants are smudged with sweetgrass, sage, or cedar smoke — purifying and preparing the body for the sacred space. STEP 5 — ENTERING THE LODGE: Participants enter clockwise and take specific positions. All bow low entering — acknowledging the sacred space, demonstrating humility before the sacred presence within.

THE SWEAT LODGE — THE CEREMONY (STEPS 6-9)

STEP 6 — THE GRANDFATHERS ARE BROUGHT IN: The red-hot stones are carried using deer antlers — never metal tools in traditional ceremony. Each stone is greeted as it enters; tobacco or cedar placed on it produces fragrant sacred smoke. The stones are arranged in the central pit. STEP 7 — THE FOUR ROUNDS: The ceremony proceeds in four rounds corresponding to the four directions, door opened briefly between each: • FIRST ROUND: Door closed. Water poured on stones. Prayers and songs. Moderate heat. • SECOND ROUND: More stones added. More water poured. Heat intensifies. Sacred songs for the ceremony's specific purpose. • THIRD ROUND: The most intense heat — where purification is most complete and sacred communication most accessible. • FOURTH ROUND: Prayers of gratitude, blessings for specific individuals, the formal ceremonial closing. STEP 8 — EXITING AND GROUNDING: Participants exit counterclockwise. Many immediately immerse in cold water (stream, snow, or cold water poured over the body) — the contrast completing the purification process. STEP 9 — THE FEAST: A communal feast follows — food shared as the communal expression of what has been renewed in the ceremony.

Iniskim

The Buffalo Calling Stone

The Iniskim (Buffalo Stone — also iniskim or iiniiskim) is one of the most distinctively Blackfoot of all sacred objects — a small naturally occurring fossil or oddly shaped stone that is understood as a gift from the Buffalo people, capable of calling Buffalo herds to the hunting area when used in proper ceremony. The Iniskim is the sacred object that most completely embodies the Blackfoot relationship with the Buffalo — the material form of the covenant between the Buffalo and the people.

THE INISKIM — ORIGIN AND USE

THE ORIGIN STORY: In the foundational narrative, during a time of starvation when the Buffalo had not appeared, a woman heard a small voice near a river bank calling to her. She followed the voice and found an ammonite fossil (or a specific type of oddly shaped stone) that spoke to her, telling her it was an Iniskim — a Buffalo Stone — and teaching her the specific songs and ceremonies through which it could call the Buffalo. She brought the stone back to the camp, performed the ceremony, and the Buffalo appeared. This story establishes the Iniskim as a direct communication between the Buffalo's spiritual dimension and the Blackfoot people. **THE APPEARANCE:** Iniskim are typically ammonite fossils (commonly found in the Blackfoot homeland — southern Alberta and Montana have abundant Cretaceous marine sediment) or other naturally occurring stones with distinctive shapes — spirals, rounded forms, stones that resemble Buffalo. Their specific natural beauty or unusual form is itself the sign of their sacred character. **THE INISKIM CEREMONY:** The Iniskim's ceremony involves specific songs (received from the Buffalo stone in the founding narrative), specific movements, and specific protocols for the stone's care and use. The ceremony is typically conducted in winter (when the Buffalo herds have dispersed and the people need to call them back) and involves the Iniskim being unwrapped, smoked with specific plants, sung to with its specific songs, and addressed with prayers calling the Buffalo to the area. **CARE OF THE INISKIM:** The Iniskim must be kept wrapped in specific materials (typically red cloth or specific animal skins), fed with specific offerings, and treated with the respect due to a sacred being. An Iniskim that is neglected or disrespected will lose its power; one that is properly cared for may grow in power over generations.

Sacred Herbs

Sweetgrass, Sage, and Cedar

THE PRIMARY SACRED PLANTS OF THE BLACKFOOT TRADITION

SWEETGRASS (IIYAHKIOHKOTOKI — 'HOLY GRASS'): The most important and most widely used sacred plant — a slender, fragrant grass (*Hierochloa odorata*) that grows in moist areas of the northern plains and parkland. Sweetgrass is braided in three-strand braids for storage and ceremonial use. When burned, it produces a sweet, vanilla-scented smoke that is the most commonly used purification and sacred invitation medium in the Blackfoot tradition. Sweetgrass smoke invites the sacred beings; it is burned at the beginning of ceremonies, used to purify sacred objects and participants, and offered as the most basic form of prayer. **THE SWEETGRASS BRAID**: The three-strand braid of sweetgrass is itself sacred — the three strands representing the mind, the body, and the spirit in some interpretations, or the three realms of the Blackfoot cosmos. The braid is lit at one end and the smoke directed over the person or object being purified using the hands or an eagle feather. **SAGE** (PAKKSINIMAANI — 'THE SMELLY ONE'): Several species of sage (particularly *Artemisia*) are used in Blackfoot sacred practice — both for their aromatic smoke (stronger and more clearing than sweetgrass, used specifically to drive out unwanted energies) and for their medicinal properties. Sage is used in the sweat lodge (participants may hold or sit on sage), in purification ceremonies, and as a protective plant medicine. **CEDAR** (VARIOUS SPECIES): Cedar is used less universally than sweetgrass and sage but appears in specific ceremonial contexts — particularly in Bundle ceremonies where cedar smoke is the appropriate purification medium for the specific sacred objects involved. Cedar also has extensive medicinal applications in Blackfoot healing practice. **TOBACCO** (PONOKA — TRADITIONAL CEREMONIAL TOBACCO): The most important offering plant — traditional Blackfoot tobacco (*Nicotiana quadrivalvis*, distinct from commercial tobacco) is offered to the sacred beings in virtually every ceremonial context. A pinch of tobacco is the most basic and most universally appropriate offering in Blackfoot sacred life. Tobacco is offered to the stones entering the sweat lodge, to the sacred objects when opening Bundles, to the land before gathering sacred medicines, and to the sacred beings in prayer.

The Transfer Ceremony (Isskinikssiyi)

The Transmission of Sacred Knowledge

The Transfer Ceremony is the most important mechanism of sacred knowledge transmission in Blackfoot culture — the formal process through which a Medicine Bundle, with all its associated songs, prayers, and ceremonial knowledge, passes from one custodian to another. It is simultaneously a sacred ceremony in its own right, a legal transaction (in the Blackfoot sense of law), an educational event, and a community celebration.

Why Transfer Matters

The Transfer Ceremony is the reason Blackfoot sacred knowledge has survived across generations. Without the formal transfer, the knowledge dies with the Bundle keeper. With the transfer, the specific songs, the specific protocols, the specific stories, and the specific sacred power of each Bundle are transmitted intact — not written down (where their power would be incomplete) but transmitted person-to-person in the specific sacred context that makes the transmission complete.

THE TRANSFER CEREMONY — STRUCTURE

THE PREPARATION PERIOD: A transfer does not happen spontaneously. The process begins when a person approaches a Bundle keeper and expresses their desire to receive the Bundle. Negotiations follow — the price of the transfer (which may include horses, blankets, money, or specific sacred items), the timing, and the specific arrangements. THE GATHERING: The transfer ceremony requires the presence of many community members — particularly those who have previous relationships with the Bundle (who have participated in its ceremonies, who have made vows related to it). These witnesses are essential; the transfer is a public act that the community witnesses. THE RITUAL RE-ENACTMENT: The transfer ceremony typically re-enacts key elements of the Bundle's origin story — bringing the sacred narrative alive in the present and reconnecting the Bundle to its foundational power. The songs from the origin story are sung; the key actions from the story are performed. THE LEARNING: Throughout the transfer ceremony (which may take several days), the outgoing keeper teaches the incoming keeper all of the Bundle's specific knowledge — every song, every protocol, every origin story, every detail of the Bundle's care and ceremony. This is the core educational moment of the Blackfoot sacred knowledge transmission system. THE FORMAL TRANSFER: At the designated moment, the outgoing keeper hands the Bundle to the incoming keeper, accompanied by specific songs and prayers. From this moment, the responsibility for the Bundle's care and ceremony shifts. THE FEAST AND GIVEAWAY: The ceremony concludes with a communal feast and a giveaway — the outgoing keeper distributes gifts to the witnesses and participants, and the community celebrates the Bundle's continuation in new hands.

The Haligricity Lens

Bundle, Transfer, and Living Sacred Objects

The Blackfoot Confederacy's sacred tradition offers Haligricity several specific gifts of extraordinary relevance to the Well-Being and Rituals books: the most complete available model of a living sacred object (the Medicine Bundle) as an active relationship rather than a possession; the Transfer Ceremony as the most complete model of sacred knowledge transmission through direct human contact; and the Okan (Sundance) as the most complete available model of the vow-and-fulfillment cycle as a sacred technology for sustaining communal ceremony across generations.

The Bundle and the Haligric Living Altar

The Blackfoot Medicine Bundle — a wrapped collection of sacred objects that is alive, that must be fed, that communicates its needs and its displeasure, that carries its own origin story and its own ceremonial requirements — is the most complete available model of the Haligric Living Altar's sacred object dimension. The Haligric practitioner who understands the Bundle understands that sacred objects are not inert things that hold symbolic meaning; they are active sacred presences that require and respond to specific forms of attention, offering, and ceremony.

The Sweat Lodge and Haligric Purification

The Blackfoot Sweat Lodge (Motokiks) — with its four-round structure corresponding to the four directions, its use of sacred plant medicines (sweetgrass, sage, cedar), its combination of extreme heat and cold water immersion, and its function as preparation for all other sacred practice — is the most physically complete purification practice in this guide series. The parallel to Shinto misogi (water purification), to Zoroastrian harae, and to the Haligric daily cleansing practice reveals the universal structure: before approaching the sacred, the practitioner must clear what has accumulated.

CONNECTION TO HALIGRICITY

The Medicine Bundle breathes. It must be fed. It was given by a sacred being to a specific person in a specific moment of crisis or grace, and that moment lives inside the Bundle as its origin and its power. When the Bundle is transferred, the origin story is re-enacted — the power is renewed through the narrative, not merely symbolized by it. This is what Haligricity holds about sacred objects and sacred narrative: they are not representations of power but concentrations of it, and they remain alive as long as they are treated as alive. The Blackfoot Confederacy has known this, in specific and practiced detail, for longer than there have been written records to document it. Grand Rising.

*"The land is not ours. We belong to the land.
The Buffalo chose us. We did not choose the Buffalo.
The Sun did not make a covenant with our chiefs.
He made it with all of us — the living, the dead, and those not yet born."*

— Reflecting the teaching of Blackfoot elders

Napi walked north and has not come back. The center pole rises in the Okan Lodge and the Sun looks down. The Bundle breathes on its shelf. The Iniskim sings in its wrapping. The first thunder of spring sounds and the Thunder Medicine Pipe must be opened whether or not it is convenient. This is a tradition that does not wait for the practitioner's schedule. The sacred calls when it calls. The practitioner learns to be ready. Grand Rising.

Personal Reading Series | Haligrity | I.Q. Productionz | May 2026