

# CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE NORTH AMERICAN VISION PATTERN. URBAN INDIAN AND RELIGIOUS REVIVAL\*

*Elvira Stefania Tiberini*

Università di Roma "La Sapienza"

## 1. Urbanization and revitalisation

The problem of ethnic-cultural continuity in the city-dwelling Indian communities in North America is necessarily linked to that of the integration and homologation of their traditional heritage to the values of the dominant culture. Though moved by different choices and motivations, these same dynamics marked the adaptation to the new establishment of European and Asian immigrants, who immigrated as the result of a choice (even if this was conditioned by urgent economic or ideological pressures) and were predisposed toward integration, moving to the city has so far represented for the Indians of America the only option to life in a Reserve and it does not appear to be automatically associated with a positive tendency towards homologation.

Other, greater, differences affect the nature of these two integrating processes. They are due partly to the different ethnic-cultural and economic-social backgrounds and partly to the different behaviour of these two categories in relation to the regional place of origin of the enclaves. For though the integration of Europeans was guided on the whole by a system which, though not a common one was at least defined by parameters which were assimilable to those current in America, the Indian cultural tradition is based on a style of life which is incompatible with the systems of beliefs and the behavioural codes which characterize the Western model. And besides, Indian city dwelling has generally been characterised by the

absence of the regional fragmentation which has marked the settlement of Europeans and consented the preservation of distinct traditions not only among the different enclaves but also within each one (1).

Apart from tribal differences, the culture of North American Natives is in fact distinguished, generally speaking, by an unquenchable and pervasive spirituality which is incompatible with the model present in the post-industrial societies and totally alien to the Western style of life whose spiritual values are exercised in more circumscribed spheres and do not seem to possess the same capacity for capillary infiltration. Indian spirituality implies a total interpenetration between every human being and the earth, nature and other living creatures, expressed in an osmotic relationship between micro and macro cosmos in perfect harmony with the sacred forces of the universe, *wakan*. Seaton and Seaton (1963: 18) deliberately underline the fact that: «The culture of Redman is fundamentally spiritual... His mode of life, his thought, his every act are given spiritual significance, approached and coloured with complete realization of the spirit world».

Consequently an effective integration of natives in industrial societies is not possible unless one bears in mind the accentuated spirituality of their vision of world; and this is the reason for the failure of imperfect strategies of assimilation directed towards a "total" homologation which has often become a forced loss of cultural integrity for the Amerindians and consequently resulted in a rapid dissolution of their ontological foundations.

The close confrontation imposed by co-residence in urban centers seems to have increased the distance between the two ideological and behavioural models and produced inevitable effects of alienation instead of remaining circumscribed in theoretical ambits and permitting the natives to carry out productive activities.

It is only recently, and particularly since the '80s, that the essential need for the revitalisation of the systems of tribal beliefs has emerged as the key to the reinforcement of Indian ethnic identity and, the facto, to city dwelling natives being suitably absorbed into the present day North American metropolis. Here, in fact, «... one means of success for



adaptation is to play a dual social role... [which] allows the individual to function without internalizing the values of white society ...[and so] to appear to be conforming while his traditional values and attitudes remain the same» (Castillo 1982: 17).

The recovery of an Indian self-awareness, the essence of which is a spiritually generally present in the religious system of most of the North American ethnic groups, ends by overstepping the confines of tribal affiliation and favoring the constitution of a widespread pan-Indianism. The dynamics of the adaptation of Amerindians in the modern metropolis and their attainment of different and more satisfying positions must therefore pass through the return to the system of traditional beliefs oriented towards spiritualism and the acquisition of a renewed Indian identity - no longer a tribal identity in the old sense, but, rather, a pan-Indian one.

The will to keep the continuity with tradition alive and the possibility of freely expressing the predominant religious and spiritual values makes it possible for the Indians of the North America to adapt adequately to urban living. Paradoxically the ability to find a balance in this kind of structure - which has become bi-cultural - and to fill a "dual" social role, provides the means for a satisfying human and socioeconomic realization in the urban centers.

Signals of the new revivalist dynamics are present in the renewed interest of the American Indians for ancient rituals and in the by now recurrent revivalistic ceremonies like the Sun dance of the Lakotas, which were reactivated in 1959 in the Pine Ridge Reserve even though the setting was to some extent impoverished by commercialisation and speculation (2) and certainly readapted to a partly altered system of symbolic representations. However the Sun dance has kept its formal design intact and has rapidly imposed itself as «a symbol of traditionality and an ethnic marker» (Medicine 1980: 281) while the principle that one of the most expressive symbolic acts of being «a traditional Native American is to Sun dance and eventually to pierce» (*ibidem*) has gained strenght. The revival of Sun dances in the Reserves has not only favored the exportation of the ceremony to urban centers, thus creating new and unsuspected links between the two, but it has also certainly

contributed to enhancing sentiments of pan-Indianism through admitting and encouraging other ethnic groups to participate. Thus the Sun dance has taken on political values and become one of the most qualified instruments for active resistance to integration. As with other recently reactivated ceremonies - Yuwipi, Sweat Lodge, Wopila - which have all been enriched with functions tending to the establishment and reinforcement of the ethnic identity on the basis of a pan-Indian register, the Sun dance too has added new objectives to those pursued in the metropolis which consist prevalently in the search for individual and social changes.

The changes in content were necessarily accompanied by modifications of the symbolic universe, which, though it still referred to tribal values, ended by absorbing stimuli belonging specifically to urban culture. And these merged into a new, significantly hybrid, semantic system.

The changes effected in the structure of contents of the old rituals are the signal of a deliberate mediation between what Powers (1987: 170) defines as «cultural theory [on the one hand] and cultural practice» on the other, a sort of compromise which became necessary as the awareness of having to confront the effects of these mutations grew and which has assumed the form of a process of «reinvention of culture» (3).

## **2. Religious revival and vision quest**

We have seen how, for the Indians of North America, reconstitutive dynamics of this kind centered essentially on the reevaluation of the old markedly spiritualist religious models, in a context defined on the one hand by the adaptability of the symbolic-religious register and on the other by the capacity of the Indian communities - and in particular of the tribal societies of the Plains - to gauge the functions according to the changed requirements of the establishment. Within the ambit of this guided process of selective retention of customs and values of the past and of the creation of new models on the foundation of the old structures, a leading role seems to have been played by the complex of vision and/or the vision quest.



In the formal structure of the Sun dance, as in the preliminaries and closing rites of the Sweat Lodge and the Yuwipi therapeutic practices, vision is still used as the most apt means for providing the mystical contact from which the answers which will ensure individual and social well-being are expected.

Vision is the cornerstone of traditional spiritual life and of the systems of beliefs of tribal societies. It remains a primary element in the dynamics of religious and social revitalisation and appears to have undergone only modest operations of symbolic and formal readaptation. In the case of vision as in that of the Sun dance (4) certain mutations motivated by the need to remodel the past on the preoccupations of the present appear inevitable and flow in a completely natural manner into the present structure, which is marked by the attempt to recreate a tradition which will serve «as a stabilizing force in a world progressively more confusing to Indians» (Darnell & Foster 1988: 8) and by the need to define what is Indians as opposed to what is white.

Vision presents itself as the most effective medium for promoting the transfer of founding values from the past to the present and effecting the required adaptations, thanks to an apparently functional malleability which constitutes both the assumption and explanation of its actual persistence. Its formal structure appears to have remained practically unchanged except for indications concerning the custom, recently established in some parts, of conducting the vision quest in "vision pits" (Powers 1982: 13; Ruby 1955: 50) (5). Its goals too, which still assume concrete form in an objective search for power, have remained unchanged; what has changed - as we will see - is the nature and use of the sought for powers which now, naturally, people want to devote to a fitting social integration while at the same time guaranteeing the conservation of their ethnic identity.

Besides, vision fullfills the need for individualism which has always been a connotation of the religious life of the natives since, better than any other ritual, it allows each person «to define his religious system» (Darnell & Foster 1988: 111); it also represents the means and ideal ambit for the objectivation of culture through the culturally codified symbolic representations

which are indispensable if one wants to clarify it for oneself and for the others.

Power has always passed through vision in the North American Plains. It was transmitted by holders who were often translated into conventional symbolic forms, while the same modalities of use and forms of transmission of power were inscribed in a symbolic-allegorical register.

Vision is still qualified today as the moment and terrain on which some of the most urgent social questions apparently merge and suitable answers are given; and though the means and channels of the activated dynamics faithfully follow the old ritual models consecrated by tradition and the questions and answers still move around matters of power and wellbeing, the contours and nature of the stakes have changed. In particular, the interlocutors who appear in the visions and from whom the reinstatement of certain equilibriums and the guarantee of a generalized wellbeing are expected have changed. In the past these were supernatural beings - animal or other spirits - today they can be Ministries or Institutions taken as abstract entities but visualized in corresponding symbolic images. On the other hand - as we have said - vision has always been the elected terrain for the transmission of semantically codified messages through a conventional symbolic repertory.

The fact that the vision has always provided an ideology - and a justification - for social change (Albers & Parker 1971: 225) definitely exalts its medial character; the confrontation between Indian behavioural models and Wasps, a sign of a radical but necessary transformation and of inevitable modifications of status, could not be resolved positively except by legitimization through a vision in which the task of recomposing the conflicts is entrusted to new mystical interlocutors.

In cultures «grounded in, surrounded by and regularly breached to transcendent realities [and for which the realities are in fact impregnated with sacredness, one cannot marvel at]... the importance attributed to dreams and visions [for in fact] individual identity and destiny are understood in terms of such experience» (Harrods 1987: 160-161).

The rather natural consequence of this is the recent tendency to invest the profane too with sacredness, both as an



effect of reassurance strategies psychologically founded on the incorruptibility of religion, and as part of revitalising dynamics which indissolubly associate the integration and revendication of ethnic identity with the reaffirmation of the tribal religion. It is within this framework, in which ritual is qualified as the central focus of the Indian Way, that one must measure the strength and dilation of the visionist experience as the irreplaceable link with a traditional past to which the present has attributed a pan-Indian dimension.

To mention only one of the most common examples, it is not by chance that vision is the basis of the mythopoeitic construction of the Oglalas: it seems oriented in them towards the reinstatement and sacralization of a government whose roots go back to original tribal origins and answer to the needs of a cosmic order. The myth of the White Buffalo Calf Woman develops along the usual lines of the apparition of a supernatural being who, in the course of a vision, produces the instruments which make the passage from chaos to order possible and clarify «... man's proper place within the system of relationships that governs the cosmos» (Melody 1980: 4). Thus vision is still conceived and used today as the most apt channel for transferring messages whose divine nature not only does not contradict but in fact strengthens their ability to affect reality. «The insertion of the people into the larger cosmic order» (Melody 1980: 11) is entrusted to vision - in this case «a deliberate irruption of the sacred into the profane» - and one cannot help noticing the political aspect of the myth which contains (even though apparently masked by the idea of a cosmological State) transparent indications in support of the operative formula of the Indian Way... «Agrément itself - Melody says - is not a sufficient principle for government; reference must be made to the larger cosmic forces that permeate reality» (Melody 1980: 15). It is significant that a reference of this kind should be made through a vision, thus confirming all its traditional semantic functions as well as the new ones solicited by cultural hybridization and the pressure of different conflicts and dilating its system of symbolic tribal representations.

### 3. Canadian testimonies

The theoretical framework we have defined is confirmed by the results of a field investigation among a small group of Plains Indians belonging to different ethnic groups - Salteaux, Plains Cree, Blackfoot - mostly resident in Calgary (Alberta, Canada) and forming the sample which - however small - has provided the adequate and indispensable live testing ground for the assumption of the theoretical investigation.

The data gathered with the help of a number of living testimonies and enriched and/or interpreted in collaboration with two informers (6) refer back to the spiritual and religious model actually in use among the Canadian Natives and codified to some extent in the form of key points which synthesize the ideology but also clarify the active roles of the individuals and the scope of ceremonies which are still significant today as expressive symbolic acts. They include explicit references to themes we have discussed above such as the fundamental «inter-connectedness of all natural things, all forms of life, with primary importance being attached to the Land, mother Earth...», the absence of a distinction between what is spiritual and what is cultural (7) and the essential activity of the Elders, whose inalienable quality is wisdom - normally directly associated with age.

The interpretation of dreams and visions is referred to the Elders, as well as the use of tribal remedies and the organization of the Sweat Lodge - respecting precise competencies which are not interchangeable and are defined by a rigorous distribution and, consequently, by a specific operative professionalism.

This summary of nativist spiritualism allots a central place to the use and significance of the pipe but it also refers explicitly to the spirit helpers, the vision quest, the sacred circle and the sacrality of the number four in day to day ceremonial matters - four are the cardinal points, four the sacred plants (sweet grass, tobacco, sage and cedar), four the fundamental aspects of personal "enlightenment" (strength, knowledge, understanding and sharing).

The will to recapture the tribal past is evident in this grid of the Indian Way which the almost unchanged structure of the



ancestral religious model is subject to, and it appears to decidedly contradict every allusion to the inevitability of remaining Indian in the metropolis which some people have snobbishly disposed of as depending on their incapacity for assimilation; aspects selected to express their ethnic "belonging" assume the form, rather, of both the end and the means of a reconstitution also directed toward fostering a more balanced relationship with the dominant cultures. In many cases the acquisition of a new status is preceded by a marginal phase and a state of confusion - a kind of modern initiation leading finally to a balanced inclusion in a dual society in which to live and operate - and in which in fact one can live and operate better - if one is aware of being Indian.

Louis (Jack) J. Kakakaway, a Salteaux by birth who is an Elder of the Calgary Native Friendship Society and consultant for the re-education of Natives for some of the penitentiaries of Alberta and Saskatchewan, summarises in his biography some of the salient passages of his own life until he returned to the culture of his origins and the recovery of his own identity as the indispensable turning point to living «a dignified existence, up to the expectations of the fathers» (8).

His return to tribal culture, of which he apparently had preserved only the language, was marked by a first phase of real apprenticeship which was indispensable for the interiorisation of the principles of Indian spirituality as a religion (9). This stage was associated with the revaluation of the ancient purification ceremonies - the Sweat Lodge -, the vision quest and not least, the use of the sacred pipe; Kakakaway compares it to the sacred objects of Catholic liturgy: «The pipe is very sacred to us much like the Catholics and other religions who have their sacred things. It is very sacred because my Grandfather made it. The pipe is handed down from generation to generation», referring, moreover, to the centrality of the survival of the pipe «that remains the transcendent expression of the people's cultural philosophical and spiritual experience» (Kaiser 1984: 2).

The pipe, used by the Elders for individual and public rituals, is also used in the course of the vision quest because of its meanings of sign-symbol of communion with the divine; when, in 1989, Kakakaway related his last vision (which had occurred four years earlier) he remembered: «I was sitting in

the circle with my pipe and I saw my brother coming toward me carrying a packet of cigarettes. He said: "I'll give you this, come on and take it". Then my mother and father, all my dead people were there. But I felt comfortable with them. Then suddenly my brother turned into a wolf, I saw it was a wolf». In Kakakaway's interpretation, besides «suggesting the need to sound out the reality behind appearances» and therefore weigh in the balance the possibility that even the most stable and sure relationships can deteriorate, the sudden transformation essentially had to test his courage (10).

The vision, which follows traditional cadences, contains typical themes and symbols - including the presence/change into an animal - but it also includes others which are clearly imported. The profane element represented by cigarettes, besides representing a suspiciously western status symbol, is significantly invested with an obvious negative shade which clearly refers to the different and profane white man's way of smoking, as opposed to the sacredness of the pipe in the Indian semantic horizon.

The addition of a hybrid symbology to the conventional repertory of visions is confirmed by the accounts of other experiences in which, from the beginning of the century, we find signs-symbols of the I and II World Wars and the Korean and Vietnam wars - flags, guns, airplanes, cannons - all interpreted, however, as the bearers of an invitation to prayer for peace in the world.

According to Kakakaway, who has emerged from a long and painful process of integration and has finally arrived to an activity of definite support of the process of reconstitution of Indian awareness in the city, life in the Reserves «is a symptom of weakness and renunciation, acceptable only for those who are unable to face risks and disappointments and are satisfied (with little)», in other words a kind of forced residence defined by a generally only apparent ethnic recognition. Consequently it is outside of the Reserves that one can evaluate the support and incidence of pan-Indian principles, strength, knowledge, "sharing" and understanding. In fact, as is natural, the measure of the adaptation and persistence of tribal values varies according to the changes in the resources, structure and make-up of the different Reserves: in the State of Alberta itself, the



Blackfoot Reserve at Morley stands out as the best example of the success of the more constructive goals of cultural exchange thanks to an organisation which ably combines the Indian Spirit and traditions with a western style managerial orientation.

On the other hand, in Calgary in particular, the creation and success of the Plains Indians Cultural and Survival School seems to confirm the Indian will for cultural preservation in view of becoming full-fledged members of the urban society (11).

The general context seems therefore to some extent to confirm Kakakaway's idea that, paradoxically, the return to Indian culture and the tribal past is pursued with greater determination - and greater success - precisely in the cities; he states in fact that «When I moved to the city I thought I would lose the culture. The Urban Indian does not lose the culture, instead we in the city are going out to the reservations and teaching them the culture. Oil rights, money and material things have ruined them. The suicide rate has gone up». The fact that the Elders are often called on to promote and direct the organization of ceremonies in nearby Reserves takes on the aspect of an unexpected return movement of the Indian patrimony - from the city to the Reserves rather than the contrary - though Deloria (1973: 253) does not confirm this when he says: «Naming ceremonies in some tribes appear to have become much more numerous, as urban Indians seeking a means of preserving an Indian identity within the confusion of the city have asked reservation people to sponsor ceremonies for them. They have travelled sometimes thousand of miles and spent thousands of dollars to be able to participate in such events». However this can be explained in a number of ways: with the new behavioural trends which have come in over a period of almost twenty years, or, more simply, with the change in city-Reserve relationships in time and in space, nor can one exclude the possibility of reciprocal exchange dynamics crossing one another and in some case coexisting, with effects of overlapping.

The fact remains that within the religious system, which the Plains Indians have recognized as being the only structure which has remained unchanged in the course of time therefore identifiable as the Indian-White boundary line, an extremely meaningful role is attributed to vision.

We have seen that the acceptance of western technology - and the values associated with it - as well as the use of its products by some of the Indians groups is not in itself the indication a perfected acculturation and can be explained as the necessary acquisition for survival and as an adequate social integration which does not contradict but exalts tribal belonging. On the other hand, the osmotic relationship between ethnic identity and religious awareness is expressed tangibly in the univocal production of the cultural boundary between Amerindians and Americans which Powers (1977: 206) refers to when he states that «the boundary which delineates Oglala religion also delineates Oglala Society».

Within the framework which is defined today by a marked pan-Indian orientation it seems therefore likely that since every Indian society - laying aside territorial dispersion and regional variations - depends almost entirely, by now, on its ritual connotations for all true recognition, it will continue living as long as it survives as a religious institution. And vision contributes decisively to the conservation of this ethnic-religious identity, even in its changed situation, preserving its essential function of channel for the social confirmation of messages of divine origin.

To conclude, if in tribal reality vision was both means and end and the vehicle for the transmission of power for individual and collective realisation, today in the Reserves and cities it is still recognized as the most authoritative and efficacious means for the transfer of vital messages. In the case of Lakotas, for example, the legalization of the cosmological government is still thought out and put into practice, as we have seen, in terms of a vision/apparition. It is a more sophisticated and in many ways westernized vision in conformity with the changed context, but this only confirms its undoubted capacity for persistence and irreplaceable cultural vitality: at all events the new functions which flow into it re-emerge in the usual forms of collective imagination and change into the old models of conventional symbolic language.

Persistence and innovation of contents - such as the transparent Good men/bad men opposition and the allegorical presentation of the white Institution as homologous to and substitutions of animal spirits - coexist in function of the new



goals (the first of which is a suitable mediation of cross-cultural relations) and prove to be objectively motivated by the mature awareness of depending on the ability to keep up good relationships with White men.

The use of vision as ritual of confirmation or of change of status - even if it is transposed from the individual to the social plane - remains therefore unchanged and flows into the inalterable nucleus of oral tradition which is decisive for the regeneration and strengthening of the identity of Urban Indians.

## Notes

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1. Within the enclave of Italian origin, for example, regionally characterized nuclei can be distinguished on the basis of the place of origin. This has led to a territorial distribution which in its turn has favored the perpetuation of distinct traditions.

2. Hot dog stands, accompanying rodeos and registration fees represent the more obvious aspects of the inevitable economic exploitation of the ceremony and also appear as signs of cultural hybridization. Even though this only represents « a mere fragment of the traditional ceremony... still more and more people, including young adults consider the Sun Dance to be the Indian religion or at least... the more conspicuous public display of old religion or revived aspects of it» (Lewis 1972: 47).

3. Powers' studies (1977, 1982, 1987) refer to the Pine Ridge Lakotas (Oglalas) who, because of their intensity and determination in pursuing the recovery of their spiritual patrimony and the system of Indian beliefs - the Indian Way -, represent the model of preservation of tribal values for other ethnic groups and constitute an ideal representative sample for the whole area of the North America Plains. This is why a number of scholars - besides Powers, Darnell & Foster (1988), Medicine (1980), Melody (1980) and others still - have studied over the past ten years, investigating their revivalist dynamics in the broader framework of the native "reformist" processes.

4. The abandon of the original - yearly - calendar period for the Sun Dance before the summer bison hunting and its substitution with celebrations called for by the assembly or on invitation appears to contradict the spirit of the ritual, even if the declared goals of "common form of adoration" apparently still persist.

5. The innovation reported by Powers which appears to be dictated by diametrically opposite principles to those which oriented the traditional choice of the most appropriate places for the vision quest - normally characterized by elevation and verticality - lends itself to different interpretations. If on the one hand it may have been suggested by simple practical considerations - the possibility for rapid staging, the closeness to settlements, equal guarantees of isolation - on the other the absolute physical

inversion with respect to the original model could be taken as the morphological indication of a change in the times which requires radical structural and formal modifications, while pursuing the unchanged mystical goal.

6. For this we thank Louis (Jack) Kakakaway, an Elder of the Native Friendship Society of Calgary and Lloyd Ewenin, Counsellor-Guide of the Plains Indians Cultural Survival School of Calgary, for their precious collaboration. My thanks go also to Happy Techentin, Cultural Manager, and Slawa Gruszczynska, Assistant Director of the Native Friendship Society of Calgary at the time of the field-work, and in general, all those who, within the ambit of the Native Society, generously provided extremely important data and information for this investigation.

7. The main lines of Indians spirituality, summarized and to some extent codified in order to transmit and spread its ideology, are to be found in a pamphlet drawn up in Canada by the Native Advisory Committee with the help of Elders Art Solomon and John Stonechild. It defines the most vital aspects of native rituals and the system of beliefs as well as the roles of those who are working actively for the continuity and reactivation of the Indian Way.

8. In an interview granted in 1989, Kakakaway said, among other things, to G. C. Dermott: «I went back to the culture. I began to share my pipe. Now I work with lifers in penitentiaries, I work hard at the cultural aspects of life and as a result I now feel I succeed», and further on, «It is very hard working with incarcerated people, but I have seen positive results in my work with them; the violence, the chip on their shoulder, is not as vicious when you give them back their culture. When they begin to believe they are not as violent, they change. Even the young offenders, whose parents never had time to teach them cultural things».

9. According to the code of religious principles drawn up by the Native Advisory Committee, the assimilation of Indian spirituality passes through «the search for one's own inner being and for the relationship between oneself and others: the only way to face tensions and fears in the effort to develop the emotional/mental ability which leads to truth and to the removal of every conflict».

10. The habit and commitment of the elders to lead the vision quest at least once a year, generally in spring, is only partly confirmed by Kakakaway's testimony. However in April 1989 he was planning for the following autumn «a ritual fast in nearby hills together with another elder, to have a new vision». Kakakaway affirmed that he had had many visions in the course of his life, from the moment he returned to his culture, and that he «had seen all the creatures: eagles, deers, bears, wolves» and that all «had had messages [for him]» to deal with current needs «even though some were visions of the past, others of the future».

11. Courses in English, in the language of art and in history, all specifically oriented towards illustrating the Amerindian background, together with courses in social and commercial studies and in traditional music and material culture, are offered with the declared intention of providing «an educational setting that will focus on Indian culture, languages and life both historical and contemporary... that will explore Indian and White Community values and needs... that will expand individual's capacity to function independently [and finally] give students the opportunity to upgrade their educational credentials leading to greater career choices».



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## Summary

Recent studies of the 80s like M. E. Melody's (1980), W. K. Powers' (1982) or H.L. Harrod's (1987) confirm P. Albers and S. Parkers' interpretative trend (1971) assigning to the visionary experience the role of a focal element in the North American Indian religious and social life throughout the time. The vision in fact, both in Reserve and urban environment, not only supplies an ideology for justifying and explaining social changes but grants power as well, just as it did in tribal times. Power has always passed through visions and the ones who appear in visions were and still are the holders of power and therefore of the Indians' welfare. Once they were spirits and supernatural beings, now they are Ministries and Governments, thought of as abstract entities or as their symbolic images. In this framework visionary experiences still provide the right medium for the Indian to keep alive the thread of continuity with the old traditions and prove to be one of the aptest elements to the vital task.

## Sommario

Recenti studi degli anni '80, come quelli di Melody (1980), di Powers (1982) o di Harrods (1987) confermano l'orientamento interpretativo di P. Albers e S. Parker (1971) che assegna alla visione il ruolo di esperienza nodale nella vita sociale e religiosa degli Indiani del Nord America. La visione, infatti, sia nelle riserve sia in ambiente urbano, non solo fornisce l'ideologia indispensabile a giustificare e a spiegare cambiamenti sociali ma, oggi come in passato, distribuisce potere. La visione è sempre stata veicolo di potere: i detentori del potere e, quindi del benessere degli Indiani, un tempo esseri soprannaturali oggi Ministri e Istituzioni pensate come entità astratte o loro ipostasi simboliche, si esprimono sempre attraverso visioni. In questo quadro le esperienze visionistiche rappresentano ancora il mezzo più idoneo a mantenere vivo il filo di continuità con le antiche tradizioni e ad assolvere alla vitale funzione di raccordo tra presente e passato tribale.