

**BRIEF REPORT – ETHNOMEDICINE:**

**THE SWEAT LODGE HEALING EXPERIENCE: AN INTEGRATIVE MEDICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

After a regular good physical work-out, such as perhaps walking or jogging a few kilometres or doing some vigorous callisthenics, martial arts or even some more gentle exercises such as Qi Gong or Tai Chi Chuan, the sweat exuding from our body serves naturally to help negate and purify the inevitable impurities constantly attacking and accumulating in our personal physiological systems. Then we may take a shower or immerse our self into a warm bath or relax ourselves in a sauna and subsequently feel so much better—hopefully with a 'good sweat' to be cleansed of some of our inevitably accumulated physiological pathogens forced to exude— at least for the time being. There is no way to prove this, as a relevant body of scientific research has not yet been contracted, but instinctively we may feel, report and support these initiatives, as in this present paper pertaining to the Native North American sweat lodge spiritual healing experience as it presently exists in this installation.

**Key Words**

Sweat Lodge, Native North American Medicine, Preventive Medicine, Healing Therapy, Purification, Spirituality

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**Reporte Breve – Etnomedicina**

**La Experiencia Curativa De La Choza Del Sudor:**

**Una Perspectiva Médico-Integrativa**

Steven K.H. Aung, MD, FAAFP

**Extracto**

Después de una buena sesión de ejercicios tal vez como caminar o correr unos cuantos kilómetros o de intensa calistenia, artes marciales o aún algunos ejercicios más suaves como Qi Gong o Tai Chi Chuan, el sudor que transpira de nuestro cuerpo sirve naturalmente para ayudar a negar y a purificar las inevitables impurezas que constantemente atacan y se acumulan en nuestro sistema fisiológico personal. Después podremos tomar una ducha o sumergirnos en un baño tibio o relajarnos en una sauna y finalmente sentirnos mucho mejor – con la esperanza de que “una buena sudada” ha expulsado algunos de nuestros inevitablemente acumulados patógenos fisiológicos – al menos por el momento. No hay manera de comprobar que ésto sea así, pues aun no se ha comisionado a un relevante cuerpo científico de estudios sobre ésto, pero por instinto podemos sentir, reportar y respaldar estas iniciativas, como se presenta en este artículo sobre la experiencia espiritual curativa de la choza del sudor de los indígenas de Norte América.

### **Palabras Clave**

Choza del Sudor – Medicina de los indígenas de Norte América; Medicina Preventiva; Terapia Curativa; Purificación; Espiritualidad.

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### **Bref Rapport - Ethnomedecine**

#### **L'expérience de Guérison de la Hutte de Sudation: Perspective Intégrative Et Médical**

Steven KH Aung, MD, FAAFP

### **Résumé**

Après un bon exercice physique, comme par exemple marcher ou courir quelques kilomètres ou faire de la gymnastique suédoise vigoureusement, des arts martiaux et même certains exercices plus modérés comme le Qi Gong ou le Tai Chi Chuan, la sueur exsudant de notre corps sert de façon naturelle à aider à annuler et purifier les impuretés qui inévitablement s'accroissent dans nos systèmes physiologiques. Ensuite, nous pouvons prendre une douche ou nous immerger dans un bain chaud or encore relaxer dans un sauna et par la suite se sentir beaucoup mieux — si tout va bien, avec une “bonne sueur” nous sommes dépurés des inévitables pathogènes accumulés qui ont été forcés à l'exsudation — du moins pour le moment. Il n'y a pas moyen de prouver cela, puisque qu'un corps de recherche pertinente n'a pas été assemblé mais instinctivement, nous pouvons ressentir, rapporter et supporter ces initiatives, comme ce présent article concernant l'expérience de guérison de la hutte de sudation amérindienne comme elle existe présentement dans cette installation.

### **Mots Clés**

Hutte de Sudation, Médecine Amérindienne, Médecine Préventive, Thérapie de Guérison, Purification, Spiritualité

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### **Ethnomedizin - Ein Kurzer Bericht**

#### **Das Heilende Erlebnis der *Sweat Lodge***

#### **Eine Integrierte Medizinische Perspektive**

## **Zusammenfassung**

Nach ausgiebigen, koerperlichen Leibesuebungen, wie zum Beispiel ein paar Kilometer Laufen oder Joggen oder kraeftiger, anstrengender, Gymnastik, Kampfsport oder auch sanfteren Uebungen wie Qi Jong oder Tai Chi Chuan, bewirkt der Schweiss der aus unseren Koerpern dringt auf natuerlichem Wege die unvermeidlichen Giftstoffe abzusetzen, die unentwegt unser persoenliches, physiologisches System angreifen. Danach koennen wir duschen oder ein warmes Bad nehmen oder uns in einer Sauna entspannen, und fuehlen uns danach bedeutend besser, in der Hoffnung, dass das Schwitzen uns von den unvermeidlichen physiologischen Krankheitserregern befreit hat - jedenfalls zeitweilig. Das wissenschaftlich zu belegen ist im Augenblick noch nicht moeglich, da einschlaegiges, wissenschaftliches Datenmaterial bisher noch nicht zur Verfuegung steht. Doch koennen wir, wie in vorliegendem Artikel der sich mit dem spirituellen Heilerlebnis befasst, wie es in der *sweat lodge* der nordamerikanischen Eingeborenen und in der hiesigen Anlage existiert, diese Initiativen instinktiv fuehlen, bestaetigen und berichten.

## **Schlusselwoerter**

Sweat Lodge, Medizin der nordamerikanischen Eingeborenen, Praeventivmedizin, Heiltherapie, Reinigung, Spiritualitaet

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## **Relatório Breve - Etnomedicina**

### **A Experiência Curativa Do “Sweat Lodge”: Uma Perspectiva Médica Integrante**

Steven K.H. Aung, MD, FAAFP

## **Sumário**

Após um exercício físico freqüente, como talvez andar ou movimentar alguns quilômetros ou fazer alguns calistênicos vigorosos, artes marciais ou mesmo alguns exercícios mais suaves tais como o Qigong ou o Tai Chi Chuan, o suor que sai de nosso corpo serve como purificação natural das inevitáveis impurezas que constantemente acumulam e atacam nosso sistema fisiológico. Então podemos tomar banho quente de chuveiro ou banheira ou podemos relaxar em uma sauna para que possamos nos sentir muito melhor com “um suor bom” para ser limpo de alguns dos micróbios patogênicos fisiológicos que são inevitavelmente acumulados e forçados a expelir - pelo menos no momento. Não há nenhuma maneira para que isto seja provado, porque uma pesquisa científica relevante ainda não foi contratada, mas instintivamente nós podemos sentir, relatar e apoiar estas iniciativas, como neste artigo referente à experiência curativa espiritual do “sweat lodge” (tratamento pela perspiração intensiva) dos Nativos Norte-Americanos como ocorre atualmente nesta instalação.

## **Palavras Chaves**

“sweat lodge”, Medicina Norte-americana Nativa, Medicina Preventiva, Terapia Curativa, Purificação, Espiritualidade.

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**INTRODUCTION**

This paper does not present an academic anthropological literature review of the sweat lodge in its various socio-cultural installations around the world in different native/aboriginal or other communities and cultures, but only a personal and spiritual experiential perspective with respect to this enlightening healing activity. It is a perspective based on over three decades of attempting to treat patients within the context of integrative medical initiatives, rooted in my own direct knowledge and extensive experience of biomedicine, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and other healing modalities at various times of the year according to the instructions of the respected native community elders according to their spiritual availability, methods and methodology. I have been extremely honoured to have been invited to participate in these sacred and secret events over the years as a person who has always been committed to the integrative healing perspective.

Some general observations may be noted from my own personal approach and journey in this experience and with respect to the integrative medical healing arts and from the relevant and often enlightening literature:

- 'Sweats' should not be seen as an irregular, anomalous or esoteric experience, but as a regular part of our daily, weekly, monthly and annual self-healing physical, mental and spiritual initiatives and activities.
- Various types and structures of sweat lodges may be constructed according to cultural traditions and belief systems. There is no absolute “floor plan,” so to speak, for any sweat lodge installation. It is based on one's elder/shaman's knowledge and experience, in choosing the sacred site and picking the willow or other branches for construction of the sweat lodge.
- Stones are a vitally important structural central ingredient—and fire and water splashed on the stones is the essential physical basic action, reaction and radiation within the confined space that has been judiciously constructed by the medicine elders/shamans. In some indigenous cultural symbolic systems, stones represent the earth, fire represents the sun and water represents the moon.
- The transformation from the heat, stone and water energy to our holistic human energy is a creative gift and art of nature, which helps us to ventilate the emotional pollution of our total body via the heat and the heartfelt feelings and singing of blessings toward all sentient beings right now and over the generations—past, present and going onward toward the future.
- This serves to help generate total physical, mental and spiritual purification and healing for all concerned.
- It must not be forgotten that the wonder drug Aspirin™ was first derived from willow tree bark.

## A SWEAT LODGE HEALING EXPERIENCE

I have had the good fortune and opportunity to be invited to participate in various sweat lodge installations over the last many years, most recently at a Plains Cree Native First Nation site (a so-called “Indian Reservation”), near Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 2005, which is the central point and focus of this paper.

First of all, what I learned to perceive and appreciate was some knowledge of how to choose the site of the sweat lodge—a highly spiritual, healing and harmonious place. This is based on the wisdom of the elders/shamans who intuitively feel the most energetic healing power of the site over past, present and future generations and manifestations.

Secondly, we used the sacred stones that have previously been collected by the elders and the shamans and we also seek to find and discover the sacred local stones in the surrounding environment to create the heat and enhance the spirituality. These stones were then burned with an intense wood fire outside the sweat lodge.

Third, we looked around and found the wood branches to construct the basic sweat lodge tent structure (Figures 1 and 2). Willow branches are most often used, which in my opinion is due not only to their natural suppleness but also their innate Yin energy nature which reacts with the Yang energy input of the heat/Fire to balance the natural energetics and enhance the empowerment of the healing experience. The tent structure, as I personally experienced it, was then covered with a canvas type of material or also a heavy blanket. This was used to create darkness within the sweat lodge, which in turn radiated what seemed to be a kind of sacred atmosphere surrounding the aura of energy. There was also a small space for our entrances and exits and for maintaining the heat within a central pit and for depositing the super-heated stones (Figure 3). These stones were deposited with a shovel by the assistants, with the shaman sitting facing the door and the guests sitting all around on the ground—men on the left side and women on the right side of the shaman. This procedure encompassed four rounds, with the assistants working in front and around the shaman, monitoring the fire, the placement of the hot stones, and the opening and closing of the door of the sweat lodge.

It must be noted that before we entered the sweat lodge about 20 hot stones had been placed in the central pit. Then, before our entrance, the shaman conducted a brief blessing ceremony with sweetgrass “incense” burning with respect to each and every participant inhaling and exhaling this smoke while at the same time offering respect for our ritual. After this ritual, we reduced our clothing to the limit, with everyone having a towel to protect ourselves from the heat and also wipe away the sweat.

It was suggested that each participant bring a small piece of folded and various colours of cotton cloth about one metre in length with any colour except black or red. This was offered to the shaman in honour of the elders—both grandfathers and grandmothers over many generations. Participants were also advised to bring the customary offering of tobacco for special use in the pipe smoking ritual opening/welcoming ceremony for the spirits to participate. According to what I have learned, offering tobacco is a traditional Native way of respecting the elders and opening up the communication of the spiritual channels.

When we entered into the sweat lodge, the shaman gave us a blessing in his or her own language and afterwards accepted our offerings of cotton cloth and tobacco, placing them on the interior roof the sweat lodge between the branches and the canvas. Then we sat around the central core of the structure, with men on the left and the women on the right and the assistants bringing in the stones for four more rounds, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. The heat became intense, depending on the number of stones, 30, 40, 50, 60, 100 or more, depending on a person's and the shaman's fortitude, willpower and experience. An apparently normal installation is for the placement of about 30 stones for about 1.5 – 2.0 hours. Inside the sweat lodge, once we were all well situated during this special healing event, the shaman presented a pipe smoking ceremony for all participants from the left to the right around the circle, with each participant smoking from the sacred pipe deeply and gently and blowing out the smoke and passing the pipe to one another in a quiet and harmonious atmosphere. The door was then closed and the shaman sang a traditional Native cultural song of respect to the grandparents, elders, parents, children and grandchildren of the past, present and new generations, while at the same time splashing the water onto the hot stones with a bundle of freshly picked and blessed deciduous green leaves or coniferous needles to create healing fumigation, which caused sparking of lights to emanate. Participants had the opportunity to follow along with the singing if they so choose.

The inner spirit appeared to re-awaken as the sweat poured from our whole body as an intense purification experience within the darkness, the heat and the singing. The shaman appeared to be attempting to call the spirits of the ancient elders to participate, while at the same time splashing more water onto the hot stones to generate more intensive healing heat energy for all concerned. These actions and reactions might be perceived as lightening flashes from the stones in the total darkness, as the heat intensifies and our bodies become profusely soaked with sweat within and without. We respectfully sang in unison together with the shaman for several minutes. The assistant then opened the door flap so we could see the light from outside and feel the coolness entering the sweat lodge (in TCM terms, this is a relatively immediate Yin↔Yang effect for balancing and harmonization).

In this case, the shaman gave us a type of blueberry juice mixture and mashed salmon to eat, passing the bowls from one participant to another, according to the traditional ritual. The pipe smoking ceremony was then performed once again for respect of the elders. The assistant subsequently brought in about 10 hot stones, placing them in the central pit. Then the door was shut and the second round began. This was repeated for 4 rounds, as delineated above. The shaman sang various songs during each of the rounds and the participants also followed this singing ritual to the best of their abilities.

In accordance with the atmospherics of the intense heat, darkness, profuse sweating and singing, many participants have their own inner feelings of spontaneous spiritual ventilation, which is a purification healing experience. Some participants cry with many tears (possibly ventilating emotional pollution) and some may have esoteric feelings such as eagles flying around their head, the breathing of the bison breath on their faces, a bear pushing against their body or a turtle uprising beneath them. Some may experience the seeing of gnomes around them or several other visualizations. In Native medicine, this may be perceived as encountering the opening of the spiritual energy. In Buddhist medicine, it may be perceived as samadhi—a

powerful, deepening and enlightening crystallization of compassionate consciousness and spirituality.

The 4th round was a final round in a specific ceremony, during which the shaman led us in giving blessings to the all the ancestors, localized spirits and the environment. From a Buddhist perspective, this may be termed face to face, heart to heart, mind to mind, spirit to spirit transmission with the ancestors and descendents. The representatives of the specific invited participant groups are invited to offer their own special singings and blessings according to their own tradition of ritual performances.

Finally, one left the sweat lodge feeling relatively more 'burned within and without out' but healthy, purified and grateful for this opportunity in self-healing as guided by the shamans and elders, who are the respected sweat lodge healing masters.

I have no doubt that there has not yet been constructed a substantive history of the sweat lodge across so many different generations and cultures around the world over the millennia. Certainly one can go to Yahoo!, Google or other so-called search engines on the Internet and find the usual interesting and often relevant background and sometimes foreground information. These various sources may or may not inculcate the 'testing' nature of the sweat lodge, which may or may not be viewed as a spiritual installation pertaining to physically surviving the intense heat while at the same time releasing and conquering one's mental fears and delusions in the extreme esoteric levels of time and space.

## **MEDICAL ASPECTS OF THE SWEAT LODGE**

Medically speaking, in my many years of knowledge and experience as a Western family physician and integrative practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine and medical acupuncture, there are several positive curative indications for the sweat lodge experience, such as the following:

- Physically, mentally and spiritually, the sweatlodge healing experience generates a sense of total release of stress for each participant.
- Physiologically, it also opens up the sweat pores, which is generally beneficial in purifying one's body from head to foot and vice versa.
- Opening up the numerous sweat pores is also specifically indicated in some skin diseases such as psoriasis, eczema and neurodermatitis.
- It is also a useful therapy for aches and pains associated with conditions such as fibromyalgia and myofascial pain, neuralgia, tendonitis and also cancer pain.
- Other general indications include migraine, gastrointestinal conditions, high blood pressure and autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus.
- Spiritually, from a Buddhist healing perspective, it facilitates ventilation of emotional pollution.
- It appears to create a deep sense of inner peace and self awareness, which is why it is often used by the shamans and elders for those suffering from addictions as well as apparent behavioural and mental instability—people with various addictions are always invited and encouraged to participate in the sweat lodge.

- By personally choosing to participate in regular sweats, it may enhance and generate spiritual purification and a more focused and healthy approach to enhancing one's personal harmony and quality of life.

On the other hand, from a general medical perspective, various possible medical contraindications and precautions must also be noted and taken into consideration with respect to the following conditions:

- Severely disabled persons with major medical problems such as heart disease, hypertension or severe neurological problems.
- Cases of medical emergencies or fatal medical conditions.
- Those with acute, severe mental conditions such as psychosis, clinical depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia—they should be encouraged not to participate in the sweat lodge unless under special medical supervision as approved by the attending elders/shamans.
- Late term pregnant women and very young infants are not indicated for the sweat lodge experience during their time.
- Patients in a major post-surgical condition should avoid the sweatlodge, as should patients suffering from conditions related to dehydration or syncope of unknown cause.
- People who have beliefs that might conflict with the ceremony should participate in the sweat lodge only with the specific permission of the attending shaman, due to possible spiritual dissonance.

## **A PERSONAL SPIRITUAL VISITATION EXPERIENCE OF THE SWEAT LODGE**

Though inhaling smoke is not generally healthy, in the case of the sweat lodge it is considered a spiritual healing experience. The inhalation of the smoke of the sweet grass is an ancient and modern form of healing “incense.” Gaining permission of the elders and shamans for inhalation of the smoke of the sweet grass was one of my first steps on this spiritual journey. My motivation was to try to appreciate and understand the medicinal effects on the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of human health and well-being, from both a preventive and curative perspective.

The pipe ceremony circular ritual from left to right and right to left and centre and vice versa seems to serve to unite all participants with the spiritual energy of the ancient indigenous community connected with our living in this modern world. The placing of the super heated rocks and the closing of the door in the total heat of the darkness for a proper period of time as determined by the attending elders/shamans seems to stimulate the awakening of the inner spirit. The physiological sweating, which one experiences in the enclosed darkened space within the context of the intense heat, steam or water vapour arising from the cold water splashed directly on the hot rocks, stimulates a profuse kind of sweating systematics over a period of limited time which seems to ventilate one's negative energy throughout the singing and the heat, while at the same time maintaining, regenerating and enhancing one's positive energy, from the past, present and future.



Of course, to diffuse the heat, it may be indicated to go outside the sweat lodge and “roll in the snow,” so to speak, in other words, to work inward and outward toward- harmonisation of the Yin↔Yang vital energy balancing systems.

My own personal healing experience was something like returning into the darkness of something like my mother womb and being stimulated deep into my inner father awareness of who I am, why I am, where I am, how I am and when I am. This is a mystical experience which is difficult to express, explain and explore in any words or language, but it is a powerful experience which radiates through one's entire being and, I believe, helps to purify us and reconnect us spiritually in this present existence as well as past and future generations.

After the several rounds, as indicated above, the physical, mental and spiritual ventilation of negative energy generates a sense of total purification, which at the deep inner level may lead to various visualizations, depending on one's attainment of inner peace and harmony. My personal vision when in this apparent heightened state of awareness was that of many miniature people, difficult to describe, like 'gnomes' surrounding all of us in sweat lodge and participating with us in the sweat lodge in a spirit of happiness and positive energy. I also envisioned eagles and the sound of their wings flapping over my head, and I also felt some sense of a bison sniffing at my face and a bear nudging me between the other participants. Occasionally, I felt something pushing me upwards from my seated position like a turtle moving beneath me.

The most fascinating and quite strange experience was the sparkling of the light with a crackling sound around the upper part of the sweat lodge during the ceremonial splashing of the cold water on the hot rocks. This made me realize power of the billions of stars shining in our cosmos reflecting into my eyes and brain cells.

Finally, when I was giving a Buddhist chanting and blessing to all sentient beings, past, present and future, I felt that all the elders, especially Chief Joseph, seemed happy, smiling and nodding their heads while wearing their headdresses with their decorations such as feathers, bones and teeth. I gave them my heartfelt respect.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The sweat lodge healing experience may or may not be right for you, depending on your specific medical condition in consultation with your personal family physician and, most importantly, with the highly qualified guidance of the native elders/shamans of this physical, mental and spiritual therapeutic modality, if you choose to seek them. You may be totally healthy—which is rare among the general population of any nation—yet one may seek to immerse in and inculcate the sweat lodge to protect good health and prevent disease and illness not only for yourself, but in respect to all sentient beings. It is almost impossible to describe in words the superlative sweat lodge installation—as the ancient aphorism goes, it must be “experienced to be believed” and, we might also add, in retrospect and prospect, it must be “believed to be experienced.”

I believe the sweat lodge is an ancient and modern manifestation of our respect for each other, for our ancestors and our descendants, for our shamans and healers and for the enhancement of our precious natural environmental energies given to us by Mother and Father

nature. In fact, it is a rare treasure of intensive purification and spiritual crystallization of natural medicine for all who will and should experience, understand, appreciate and evaluate its healing power within the context of biomedicine and other complementary and integrative healing modalities—and also with respect to intensive and heartfelt self-care, self-discipline and self-awareness. While the sweat lodge healing experience has been suppressed in the past in various socio-cultural and political systems in North America and around the world, it continues to survive and indeed thrive for the surpassing healing benefit of all sentient beings everywhere around this present, past and future existence.

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## Notes

- It must be noted that I have permission of Bernie Makokis, Chairman, Tribal Chiefs Institute, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and the associated elders/shamans/healers (Robert Cardinal and Ken Kootnay) to publish this special paper—and the healing power of the sweat lodge remains indestructible and almost indescribable. I have also been involved with Russell Willier, Cliff Pompano, Francis Tittosi, et al in many sweat lodge ceremonies. Gratitude is also expressed to Dr David E Young, Professor Emeritus, Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta, for helping to facilitate my

experiences in the Native community of Alberta with respect to these health and healing experiences, initiatives and installations. While there are many academic references to the sweat lodge, the celebrant must consult with her or his elder/shaman before participating in this actual experience at some specific place and time.

- ***Dr Steven Aung, MD, OMD, PHD***, is a geriatric and family physician and a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner and teacher. At the University of Alberta, Dr Aung is an Associate Clinical Professor in Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry and an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Extension. He is a World Health Organization advisor on TCM. Dr Aung was awarded a Professional Excellency from the Académie Diplomatique de la Paix in 1986, the Alberta Order of Excellence in 2002 and the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal in 2003. His primary interest is the integration of TCM and Western biomedicine within the context of a more natural and compassionate approach to health and primary health care.



Figure 1. Basic Willow Framework Spiritual Installation/Structure of a Sweat Lodge Demarcated at the Four Corners (Photo Credit: Herman Went)

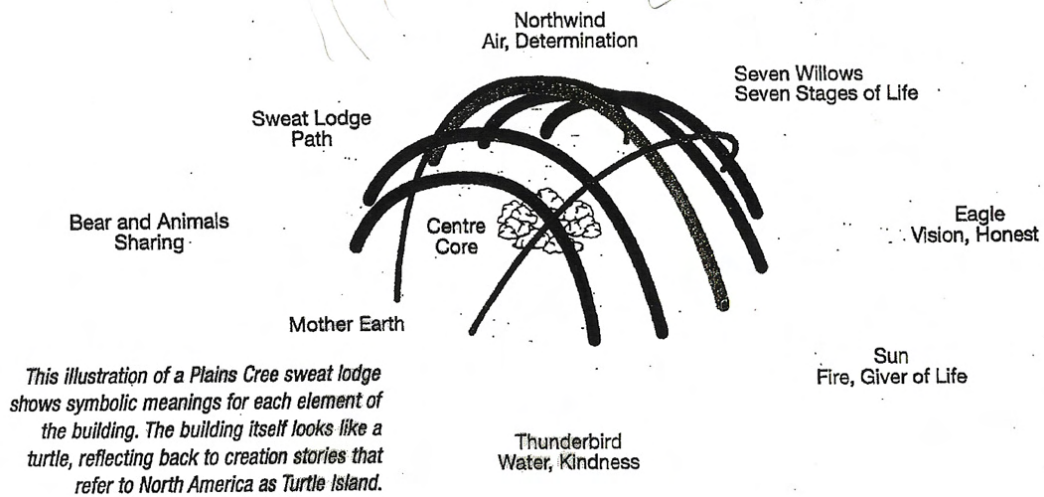


Figure 2. General Model of the Sweat Lodge Created by Bernie Makokis, Chairman of the Tribal Chiefs Institute, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada



Figure 3. A Celebrant/Devotee Physically, Mentally and Spiritually Heating the Stones for Placement in the Centre of the Sweat Lodge (Photo Credit: Steven KH Aung)