

RECLAIMING SPIRIT GIFTS FROM THE SWEAT LODGE

Preventing alcohol **bilikawiia** (bad water)
use among American Indian Youth

Awúsuua Sweat Lodge

“The sweat lodge has always
been used for guidance and
living the good life.”



LIVING THE GOOD LIFE, REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE

Back in the buffalo days, we did not have physical, verbal, or sexual abuse. These came to us when people started using drugs and alcohol. A different spirit comes into people when they partake in drugs and alcohol. We create the bad among ourselves. One of the ceremonies that we use to cleanse our bodies and celebrate life is the **Awúsuaa (sweet lodge)**. The Awúsuaa is a ceremony our people have used for hundreds of years to cleanse their bodies and open their hearts and minds. Many people practice the Awúsuaa ceremony for self-discovery and to celebrate life. If people use alcohol or drugs, we do not allow them in the Awúsuaa. The bad spirits are going to be spread among the participants. We call it the devil or evil; man creates the bad. The incentive is to be clean, so you can go into an Awúsuaa. When we go into a sweat, we ask for help, and we ask to return to our traditional culture and spirituality.

RUNNING A SWEAT LODGE

When we cleanse ourselves with sweet grass, sage, bear root, or flat cedar... this gets rid of all spirits before we go into the lodge.

We start with four. Four is a unique number in Indian culture. Four symbolizes the four directions or four seasons. These are individually picked when the first four rocks are placed into the Awúsuaa. After the first four are selected, others can be placed on top. There are four rounds in a sweat with breaks in between. In the first round, water is poured on the rocks four times. When we breathe in the sacred steam, the beads of sweat come out of our skin, we get grounded, and we find ourselves. During the second round, water is poured seven times (representing the big dipper or seven buffalos that helped the tribe). After the second round, we bring in the water. The water is shared by a dipper. We drink from the outside. We don't drink water from the pail. We bring in separate water jugs or separate containers for themselves. Part of that is to refresh your body. The water cleanses you, your blood, and anything going on with you internally. In the third round, water is poured ten times (representing the number of moons between conception and birth). The last round, we call the infinite round. On the last round, there could be an infinite number of pours representing life that goes on forever.

*Note: This narrative was shared by Les Left Hand (Crow), RMTLC All Nations Youth Partnerships for Success Director. The steps and teachings here reflect his Crow traditions. Other tribes have different teachings about the Awúsuaa (sweat lodge).

PRAYER

We pray in the lodge. When we go in, it is for prayer, our families, and our lives. It is a sacred ceremony where miracles happen. When you pray, it is a wholehearted prayer you get with your spirit. People that go in find this as well. Sometimes it is a gradual influence. Other times it is instant. You can feel that power. There is a certain power. Once you get to that certain point with the heat, you feel like you cannot take it anymore. But as you pray, your spirit opens, your mind opens, and the spirits within the Awúsuaa. Everyone is praying in there. Four people are praying aloud or silently.

AFTER THAT, WE REMEMBER WHO WE ARE

Learning about yourself is the heart of the matter. You find that out from God. You find yourself through God. You may be lost for a while. But if you keep going to the Awúsuaa, you will have a better understanding. On their journey to recovery from drugs and alcohol, people can sustain themselves through the teachings of the Awúsuaa.

THIS IS HOW WE TEACH YOUNG PEOPLE.

THE SPIRIT IS INFINITE

You are always going into an undiscovered country, the future because we pray about that as well. We must remember that the spirit and the body are two different things. The body is temporary. Our body is weak, to begin with. When we get old, it gets tired. The spirit is infinite. It goes on and never ends.

WHAT IS ALCOHOL AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

Alcohol is a depressant; it slows down your vital functions, like slurred speech and unsteady movements, and distorts your perception of reality. You can think of alcohol as the opposite of caffeine.

YOU ARE LOSING YOUR SPIRIT

Once consumed, **Bilikawiia (bad water or alcohol)** causes you to lose your spirit. This can be prevented by avoiding Bilikawiia. You can always retrieve your spirit. Ask for help through prayer, your family, and your ancestors. Bilikawiia may seem like a fun idea or even a way to escape life, but all it does is destroy your body and mind making it impossible for you to care for those you love and know your sacred place in this world.

- **Instead of drinking, communicate with your ancestors through prayer or look to elders** for storytelling or new teachings about your community.
- **Get involved with community organizations to enrich your community.** Be the change that you want to see in your tribe. Don't be a statistic!
- **Start something in your community that it needs** or start a social media trend showcasing what you're proud of in your tribe.
- **Learn a trade your tribe practices** like beadwork, sweet grass braiding, or even learning to dance or sing.
- **Be the reason someone stops drinking.** Practice love and patience.

MOST AMERICAN INDIAN YOUTH DO NOT DRINK BILIKAWIIA:

- **84% of American Indian youth** (ages 12-17) in the US and **69% of American Indian youth in Montana did not drink alcohol** in the last 30-days^{2,3}
- **70% of American Indian adults** (ages 18-25) **do not binge drink** (consuming five or more drinks in 2 hours), and 99% of American Indian adults do not report heavy alcohol use (binge drinking on five or more days in the past month)²
- **90% of American Indian adults do not have an alcohol use disorder**²
- **Youth involved in the All Nations Youth Partnerships for Success program and cultural activities reported less alcohol use** than other AI youth in Montana. Here, 21% of American Indian Montana youth tried alcohol before age 13 compared with 18% of youth involved in cultural activities.¹

“The Bilikawiia (bad water or alcohol) takes you to a different element. It takes you down the road of depression and all this stuff you are trying to get rid of. With all the sweat and steam, it purifies you.”

PREVENTION RESOURCES

- **Above The Influence, resources for youth, families, and educators:** www.abovetheinfluence.com
- **Centers for Disease Control, general information:** www.cdc.gov/alcohol/index.htm
- **National Association for Children of Addiction, support for teens with family members with alcohol or drug abuse disorders:** nacoa.org/families/just-4-teens/
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, hotline:** Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or visit www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline
- **WeRNative, wellness resources for Native youth by Native youth:** www.wernative.org
- **Youth Dynamics, prevention education and treatment:** www.youthdynamics.org/programs/substance-abuse-education-and-treatment/

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