

# THE SPIRIT PATH

PETE PUTRA WAS LOST IN DRUGS  
AND ALCOHOL UNTIL HE REDISCOVERED  
THE SUN DANCE AND SWEAT LODGE

**P**ete Putra is silhouetted against the opening of the sweat lodge, steam rising around him. Cold winter night air from the mile-high Nevada basin seeps in through the small opening, providing brief respite from the nearly suffocating heat. But that is temporary. The lodge — a low dome of willow branches covered with plastic and tarps — has been opened to allow more red-hot rocks to be brought inside.

Melon-sized basalt rocks are carried into the lodge on a pitchfork and Putra arranges them in the center pit using a deer antler. The pockmarked rocks seethe a glowing red as if they would become molten again and re-form as obsidian.

But it is the people inside the lodge who are to be melted down and reborn.

PHOTOS AND STORY BY GLENN OAKLEY



Entering the lodge, says Putra, one enters the Earth's womb. Tobacco is smoked in offering. Sweetgrass is seared on the rocks. Prayers are given. A pipe is passed. Songs are chanted.

"The world is stopped," he says.

Inside the pitch-black lodge, with Putra chanting in a high wail, it could be the year 1820, with ponies tied outside and beyond them a village of teepees, fires burning, bison humps roasting, hides tanning.

But that illusion evaporates quicker than steam in cold air. This is modern Indian country — 20 square miles of high Great Basin country straddling the Idaho-Nevada border — known as the Duck Valley Reservation, the government-approved home to two different tribes, the Shoshone and the Paiute.

One hundred years ago a Paiute man named Wovoka started a spiritual movement among Western tribes whose culture was being crushed by white civilization. Wovoka's ghost dance prophesied a return of the buffalo and the Indians, and invincibility for braves wearing the ghost shirts.

But at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, bullets cut through the ghost shirts and their Sioux owners. The few surviving buffalo were herded into Yellowstone Park and the surviving Indians were herded onto reservations like Duck Valley.

The ghost dance died, and Native American religion was outlawed. In fact, not until 1978, with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, was Indian religion technically legal.

Today Duck Valley, like most reservations in America, is a place all too familiar with suicide, alcoholism and poverty. "I think a lot of Indian people have spiraled down because of diseases," says Putra, naming alcoholism as the leading disease. "And I think a lot are still spiraling down because of diseases. We have lost a sense of who we are."

Putra, a Chippewa-Cree, has worked as a drug and alcohol counselor. But it has been by returning to the traditional religion of his people that he has healed himself. Returning to the Indian culture and religion, says Putra, is "an attempt to try to heal. A lot of Indian people try to go back and rediscover what was lost in their process of recovery [from drug and alcohol abuse]. At least that's what happened with me."

Born 32 years ago on the Fort Belknap Reservation in north-central Montana, Putra grew up traveling across Montana as his father followed construction work projects.

He was raised a Catholic, but says he left the church "at 12 or 13 when I started using drugs and alcohol. Then marijuana and alcohol became my religious experience for a while." He says his entire family — mother, father, brothers and sisters were addicted to alcohol at one time.

He moved to Duck Valley for his senior year of high school, where he says he



*Putra's sweat lodge on the Duck Valley Reservation is a place where "the world is stopped."*



*"The Ghost Dance," as painted by Chippewa Daniel Green Sky. He is a junior art major at BSU.*



"raised hell" and as a non-reservation Indian "went into a cultural shock." But he was also reacquainted with the sweat lodge, traditionally used by Native Americans to purify themselves, through several cousins who practiced the old ways.

After high school Putra joined the Marines, which is where, he says, "I realized I wanted to return to Duck Valley." Putra says he was drinking heavily in the Marines. Eventually, he says, "I think I more or less made a decision and realized alcohol wasn't bringing me what I wanted in life." The change did not come immediately, however. "It took me awhile to get on my feet — a couple of failed relationships, a couple of suicide attempts."

He visited a sun dance in Duck Valley and was invited by the presiding medicine man to join. "I told him I'd think about it," he says. "I did think about it and I did go into it. The sun dance really helped me to get straight."

The sun dance lasts four days — four days of dancing, without food or water. The breasts are pierced with claw or wood attached by cord to a center pole or tree. The dancers strain against the pole until the flesh tears free.

"It's a pulling away from everything," says Putra of the sun dance. "It's a sacrifice. My reasons for sun dancing were my family. I wanted them to get a blessing.

"It helped me look at myself, [to see] how insignificant I was compared to the universe. I'm a very small part of the larger creation. It helps me be humble. With the use of alcohol we have this pride. But when you're knocked down and you're made humble you realize mother Earth can destroy us.

"Some people go into the sun dance for personal power, for personal gain. But for myself I just wanted to learn. I learn about myself. Not only is it showing me who I am, but showing me there are other people who may need my guidance and help."

He has worked in Salt Lake City as coordinator for an Indian recovery center. He worked until recently as an alcohol and drug adolescent counselor at Port Hope in Canyon County. And when he completes his degree in secondary education and history at Boise State, he hopes to teach at Owyhee School on the Duck Valley Reservation.

But for his religion, he says, "There is no open recruitment. I think it's more of a choice." And he is careful to emphasize that he is not a medicine man and "that those things I have knowledge of are borrowed — borrowed from elders, borrowed from relatives."

For Indians like Putra, the old ways have to be borrowed and recovered because the traditional ways were nearly severed by the reservation system and government policies. Growing up largely outside the reservation, he was even further removed from Indian life.

It is important to note that there is no such thing as a single "Indian religion." There are more than 500 tribes in North America, each with its own religious practices. The Native American Church, which incorporates peyote into its practice, is a relatively new religion. Putra says the Native American Church has also helped many Native Americans overcome alcoholism.

Dallas Gudgell, a Dakota Sioux now living in Boise, says, "You can't lump all Indian people together. But there are some core

issues that penetrate all tribes. One is spirit: all things have spirit. Our tribe was connected to the spirit of the buffalo. Some of the West Coast tribes are connected to the salmon."

Even rocks and trees have spirit, says Gudgell, and the Great Mystery or the Creator is "a collection of all these spirits."

Another commonality is the circle. "The web of life is connected and goes in a circle," Gudgell says.

The dome of the sweat lodge is symbolic of that circle, and the spirits are honored in the lodge. Says Putra, "When I collect rocks for my sweat, I'll put tobacco down and ask those rocks [permission to use them], just like I would talk to a human being. You are being respectful and you are asking for permission."

If the sun dance set Putra straight, he says, "I think it's the sweat that helps me maintain my sobriety. The sweat is for the common man."

Using religion to overcome problems like addiction is hardly new. It is a basic tenet in Alcoholics Anonymous and its offshoots. But for the Indian people, traditional religion can simultaneously reunite them with their heritage and culture — the shattering of which helped bring on the addictions and problems. The recovery, like the problem, is circular.

"A lot of them [Indian people] can't accept what happened [to the Indian culture]," says Putra. "But as a result of their alcohol abuse, they also can't accept responsibility for their own children, their family or themselves." It is up to the Indian people, Putra believes, to heal themselves and solve their problems.

Inside the sweat lodge, Putra continues his healing, continues his path.

Another ladle of water is poured on the rocks, vaporizing in a cloud of smothering wet heat. He chants out his prayers, prayer songs that were borrowed. And one song that is his own, given to him in a dream. □