

## **The impact of colonial contact on the cultural heritage of native American Indian people**

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### **Introduction**

When Christopher Columbus set out on his quest for riches and landed upon the shores of America in 1492CE, he thought he had found a new world. Contrary to this, an old world long inhabited by a civilisation that had arrived across the Bering Strait from Asia, tens of thousands of years prior to Columbus' arrival, was already in existence (Taylor and Sturtevant 1996; Zimmerman 2003). Believing he had finally reached 'the East Indies off the coast of Asia' (Hightower-Langston 2003, 2), Columbus named the inhabitants he encountered *Indios* (ibid.; Clare 2000). Given Columbus' geographical misunderstanding, under which these Native peoples of America were called 'Indians', this paper will purposely address them as 'Native Americans'. In demonstrating some of the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Native American peoples, there will be a focus on how contact with European colonisers has affected these beliefs and practices.

Before commencing however, it should be stressed that there are limitations to the material available on Native American peoples and their culture. This is because 'storytelling is innate and inherent in Native culture [and is] the traditional method of transmitting information' (Struthers cited in Grandbois and Sanders 2009, 571). Information transmitted orally thus ensured knowledge was not only understood accurately but was also received by the peoples, informing each Native member who they are (Zimmerman 2003). Therefore, there was no need for written records to be kept by the Native peoples. Hence, little is known about them prior to the invasion of the Europeans in the early 16th century. Until recently, what is known of them was predominantly documented by white observers, many of whom wrote in order to 'justify the slaughter and mistreatment of the native population' (Clare 2000, 2).

Consequently, the information available on Native American peoples and their traditions was presented in light of this ulterior agenda. Tracing and recording Native tradition from elders cannot offer much insight either as approximately ninety percent of the indigenous peoples, whole generations, were lost to European diseases, massacres, displacement and assimilation (Hightower-Langston 2003); resulting in the loss of many 'bearers of knowledge and tradition' (Taylor and Sturtevant 1996, 17). Under such circumstances it is difficult, if not impossible, for the details of an old way of life to be preserved intact and accurately by oral tradition alone across hundreds of years of social and cultural change. It is only through more recent archaeological and ethnological studies,

along with the academic involvement of Native American peoples, that in the last thirty years a more accurate picture of historical events has emerged. In addition, the impact these events had on Native American people and their culture has given rise to more impartial scholarly material to become available, thus providing a deeper and more reliable account of the Native American peoples (Spence 1994).

Accepting the lack of objective and current material that is available, this paper will attempt to present some of the cultural heritage of the Native American peoples and the impact European colonial contact has had on this heritage, beginning with the history of the Native American peoples, primarily those in the North (Spence 1994).

### **Beliefs and Rituals**

Archaeologists have found evidence of a Native presence in Northern America since the Ice Age. It is believed that hunters from northeast Asia crossed the 'Beringia, a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska' (Zimmerman 2003, 12), whilst following herds of wild animals. Little is known about the beliefs and practices of these peoples prior to their migration. However, what is known is that such was the diversity of the Native American peoples that there existed in excess of approximately 700 tribes, each unique to the other with their own distinctive subculture of beliefs, customs and practices (Hightower-Langston 2003; Schwing 2008; Tooker 1979). Some groups practiced nomadic lifestyles whilst others lived in permanent villages. Where some groups 'practiced animistic religions and had egalitarian social structures; others were almost theistic and had hierarchical social structures' (Zimmerman 2003, 8). Despite the differences between the tribes, they all believed in a variation of the same creation myth. This myth decreed that life emerged from the interior of the earth. The earth resembled the womb of a mother in which she nurtured life. This shared belief in the birth of their existence is what connected them and their way of life with the landscape (Martin 2001; Erdoes and Ortiz 1984).

This common belief in the creation story extended to a shared perspective on the world; that it was a sacred place in which respect for the land and its features was to be strictly maintained. Humans were created by a higher power that was sometimes referred to as 'God', 'The Creator' or 'The Great Mystery' (Schwing 2008, 72). The human creation was not considered above the rest of creation but as equal to it, ultimately connecting both, 'spiritually and physically' (ibid., 72). Mother Earth and Father Sky were seen to provide sustenance but also challenge the peoples when a balanced and respectful relationship was not forged or maintained with the rest of the world; therefore, their very

existence depended on this (Ross, cited in Grandbois and Sanders 2009). As a result, each tribe held spiritual significance to particular animals and landforms which linked their tribe to specific traditions, the basis of their entire faith. This spiritual connection with animals and landforms was held by every tribe. The connection stemmed from a belief that the animals and landforms were manifestations of actual spirits; a spiritual concept known as 'Hierophany' (Versluis 1997, 33).

Variations of the concept Hierophany existed amongst the tribes as to what precisely constituted a spirit. There was disagreement over whether the spirit was a guardian spirit, the spirits of ancestors, animals or natural forces that inhabited the sacred animal or landform. Regardless of this difference, to all Native American peoples, the object was and still is a means to express a spiritual connection to the Earth, whether to ask for guidance, protection, help, or to simply offer gratitude. An example of a sacred landform can be a place at high altitude where the earth is closer to the sky, a juncture where spirits are considered more accessible. This is important when carrying out rites. Other places are sacred because of a mythical belief that a tribe originated from the area, providing the peoples with their identity and subsequent traditions (Versluis 1997). Wisdom places are where 'holy peoples conduct their rituals or individuals seek a vision; others may be sites of pilgrimage for specific clans or whole tribes' upon which the very existence of the tribe is dependent on the carrying out of the rite (ibid., 27). These ancient beliefs and practices are what make up the core of Native American religion and provide the peoples with their identity.

This identity and way of life was to be threatened with the arrival of Europeans seeking to colonise the Americas. Initially, with the landing of Columbus, 'tribes welcomed the new settlers' (Stotter 1999, 8) and the relationship between some of the Natives and the Europeans was mutually beneficial. Influence between the Native Americans and the colonisers were reciprocal, whereby both colonialists and Native Americans learnt new skills or refined existing ones. From the Native peoples, colonialists learnt to employ better diplomatic practices, agricultural techniques and hunting skills. Native Americans gained horses, muskets and trading contracts. However, in later years, the Native Americans loss was to far outweigh their gains when relations with European colonisers altered their lives drastically.

### **Colonial impact**

The impact on the lives of all the Native American peoples began subtly after years of contact and trading. Changes began to occur in the religious traditions of the Native American peoples. This can be seen in the way their mythological stories altered to address the existence of European peoples.

Creation stories now claimed Mother Earth had created different coloured peoples as opposed to just those native to America. Some members of the Creek tribe claimed it was because the Creator undercooked the Europeans, hence why they were so fair and when she cooked the next peoples they were brown like the Natives, thus explaining the colour difference between the two nations. This early period of contact shows relations were relatively harmonious; however, generations later problems began to arise (Martin 2001).

By the 17th century, Native American peoples found themselves dependent upon European goods purchased on credit. In order to negotiate better trading terms or cover the debts accumulated as a result of overbuying and being unable to pay for the goods due to poor hunting seasons, the Native American peoples sometimes had to cede land that was held in high spiritual regard. Simultaneously, as more Europeans began arriving and settlements expanded, colonialists 'became less interested in Indian trade, and far more interested in acquiring Indian land, through any means necessary' (Martin 2001, 49).

One of the methods to achieve this was through conversion to Christianity. Missionaries were sent from Europe to proselytize the Native American peoples and some from the Cherokee tribe did voluntarily convert. One such person was seventeen year old Catherine Brown who, in her attempt to stem the tensions arising between her peoples and the Europeans, began to study the ways of the colonialists. Using religion as a basis to engage in mutual dialogue, Catherine chose to attend a missionary boarding school.

In her quest to learn more about Christianity she identified symbolic similarities between her own native beliefs and that of the colonialists. Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on a mountain and Jesus preaching his most important sermon, in a small but distinct way resonated with her own Cherokee tradition, in which Thunder Gods were believed to reside within mountains. Another example identified with was that of Jesus wandering the desert on a spiritual journey and a Cherokee sick warrior facing a monster in the woods on his journey too. Both religions drew parallels in identifying with a prominent individual seeking a spiritual quest, a similarity considered profound to some Native Americans. For some members of the Lakota tribe reconciling both Christianity and their own native beliefs was based on identifying similarities between both religions too, making it easier for them to accept conversion, if not wholly then at least partially, whilst still retaining some elements of their own Native beliefs. For them, the 'seven sacraments of the Catholic Church were similar to the seven sacred ceremonials performed by the Lakota peoples' (Martin 2001, 76).

For other Native American peoples, attraction to Christianity was less spiritual and more practical. Conversion was often viewed as a way to 'gain respectability, recognition from powerful whites and a good education' offered by missionaries (Martin 2001, 75). However, most literature, both historical and contemporary, strongly suggests the primary motive for sending missionaries to convert the Native American peoples was rather to integrate them into the European dominant culture. This was so native culture could be completely eliminated. In this instance religion was used as a means to an end (Palmiste 2008; Grandbois and Sanders 2009).

A method used to achieve this cultural domination involved massacring vast numbers of natives to reduce resistance. Those that survived were forced onto reservations with little resources, natural or otherwise, in order to limit survival. There was also a deliberate introduction of diseases such as smallpox and the plague, as Colonialist knew there was no native immunity against them (Anderson 2010). Children were also victim to the colonialist strategy of cultural domination, even when they were considered less of a threat to mainstream colonial culture. They were forbidden to converse in their native languages, a stratagem to 'eradicate any trace of their original culture' (Palmiste 2008, 79).

They were also separated from their families and placed in distant boarding schools in order to minimise parental influence and simultaneously reduce the chance of community survival. Native uprisings occurred sporadically against such atrocious treatment, but were often counter-productive with further losses incurred on their part. As a result, most if not all Native American peoples surrendered against such massive physical and cultural genocide and tried to retain what little they could of their identity when nothing else was left to them (Hagan 1993).

Scholars such as Simon Ortiz (cited in Anderson 2010) argue that the Native culture, the European colonisers brutally tried to eradicate, is not lost, it has simply continued unchanged but under the languages of the colonialists: Spanish, French, English and their own Native Language. However, Anderson (2010, 253) counter-argues that this alone suggests Native Americans have been 'forced to forsake their native selves' in having to succumb to different linguistic and education systems and, as a result, have altered their fundamental culture. French (2008) argues that few can deny colonial contact influenced all Native societies' customs and beliefs both directly and indirectly. When undoubtedly, spirituality for the Native American peoples means to be in harmony with every part of the cosmos, to then forcibly separate them from their sacred associated objects would inevitably

break their 'connection to the spiritual elements' (Rybak and Decker-Fitts 2009, 335), an important dimension of their crucial 'Red Path'.

This 'Red Path' is a path of goodness, to wholeness and harmony 'characterized by traditional Native American cultural values, such as establishing a feeling of belonging, a sense of mastery, respect for independence, and promotion of generosity and unselfishness' (Thin Elk, cited in Rybak and Decker-Fitts 2009, 335). To remain on this path is crucial to the Native peoples to ensure righteousness and good is always maintained.

This spiritual need and path was disregarded by colonialists seeking land and riches, who cared not for the beliefs and ways of the Native peoples. It was also overlooked by missionaries who tried to convert the Natives to Christianity. Both failed to understand the many purposes of the native peoples' belief and rituals, therefore failed to understand the consequences of denying the Native peoples their right to practice. Both colonialists and missionaries believed Native rituals and beliefs were pagan and primitive, a satanic worshipping of nature and spirits (Anderson 2010).

What both groups failed to appreciate was the complexity of these rituals and the role they played in the wider society and community of the Native Americans. Using Robert Merton's theory, an expansion on Durkheim's theory of religion, that some actions have apparent manifest function but also latent (subtle) functions too and applying this to the example of the Hopi tribal rain dance, the obvious manifest function of the dance is to call forth rain. Its latent function, however, is to bring together a tribe, strengthen the ties between its members and to ensure tribal identity is preserved. According to Rybak and Decker-Fitts, many Native rituals also have the latent function of promoting a 'greater sense of connection to deeper spiritual and emotional issues, contributing to the healing of significant wounds inflicted by traumatic and painful life experiences' (2009, 339). For the Native American peoples, many of these traumatic experiences had been brought on from negative colonial contact. Not being able to carry out sacred practices so integral to the daily life of the Native American peoples had a great and lasting impact, not just on their spirituality, but their mental and physical wellbeing too. The effects of this impact are still being felt today.

One such impact is 'Psychocultural marginality', a loss of one's cultural identity, along with social and personal disorganisation brought about when peoples are 'denied access to their traditional cultural values and norms' (French 2005, 156). In the case of the Native American peoples, this was due to forced removal, displacement and cultural genocide (via attempts at assimilation and re-

socialisation). All of which has led to low self-esteem, extreme poverty, oppression, depression, loss of identity, substance abuse, violence, lower life expectancy, low educational attainment, limited employment, poor housing and ill health amongst numerous other conditions (French 2008; Ryback and Decker-Fitts 2009). According to Manson and Brenneman (cited in Grandbois and Sanders 2009) empirical studies show that many of these ailments and disadvantages occur due to the extreme personal loss and threat to personal identity the Native American peoples have been subjected to as a result of colonial contact. Moreover, many Native Americans are not re-socialised adequately after the failed attempts at assimilation into the dominant culture. Subsequently, they are left feeling as if they do not 'subscribe fully to either their traditional culture' (Grandbois and Sanders 2009, 570) or that of the Euro-American society. This has led to historical trauma and cultural alienation resulting from 'colonialism, acculturative stress, cultural bereavement, racism, and genocide that has been generalized, internalized, and institutionalized' (ibid., 570). This negative impact to the Native American is 'cumulative, unresolved, historic, and ongoing' (Danieli, cited in Grandbois and Sanders 2009, 570). Continual exposure to colonial abuse increases the chance of falling victim to the disadvantages and disorders of this way of life, which increases the difficulty of rebuilding their own Native American culture and personal wellbeing.

Taking all these challenges into account, it is nothing less than amazing that their culture has survived despite everything the Native peoples have endured. French (2008), Heavy, Runner and Morris (cited in Grandbois and Sanders 2009, 569) agree that spirituality, ceremonies, rituals, tribal identity, oral tradition and family were all affected by contact with European colonisers, but they suggest that what remained of these were 'protective strategies that kept Native peoples strong'. Of them all it was spirituality that was the 'core of Native peoples' survival' (ibid., 569). Ortiz (cited in Anderson 2010), who earlier claimed that Native culture was not lost but has continued via different languages, also agrees that it is not because of a 'passive adaptation but as a creative Native resistance' that their culture has continued to survive (Anderson 2010, 253; Martin 2001).

Threats to the Native American peoples' religion have not ended with the colonial era. Modern society is now intruding on Native American spirituality via tourism, exploitation, modern development and 'New Age' movements. They are further threatening what little there is remaining of Native American peoples' religion and identity. Despite The 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, guaranteeing the 'right of Indians to practice their traditional forms of spirituality and worship ... there are continued court battles for the right to practice traditional beliefs' (Donna-Hightower 2003, 8-9).

One such battle the Native American people face is against modern developments that involve construction on sacred landforms. This is one of the major causal factors leading to a complete breakdown of Native peoples' religion. An example of this is the controversy surrounding a holy site in Northern California. This site is sacred to the Yurok, Karok and Talowa tribes, whom generations have used as a sacred landmark for their vision quest. The United States Supreme Court allowed the site to be decimated in order to build a road that would be little used and which the Native peoples and many non-natives too regarded as completely unnecessary. This was allowed despite the American constitutional rights to Freedom of Religious Practice, 'the absence of any compelling social or economic necessity' (Versluis 1996, 36) and a persuasive argument by Dissenting Justice William Brennan, Thurgood Marshall and Harry A. Blackmun that by destroying this Native American sacred site, the government would by extension be destroying the peoples freedom to practise their religion. So much so that

Respondents here have demonstrated that completion of the road will completely frustrate the practice of their religion ... will virtually destroy respondents' religion, and will necessarily force them into abandoning these practices altogether (Versluis 1996, 36).

Unfortunately, the respondents' plea was ignored, like many of the pleas of the Native American peoples across most of the United States of America.

These threats, however, do not end here. Further threats to Native American religion are caused by the rise of tourism and 'New Age' spiritualists looking to exploit the traditions and practices of the Native peoples. 'Misinterpretation, decontextualization, and popularization of native ceremonies [are causing] serious disruptions in local practice' (Neizen and Burgess 2000, 7). The 'New Age' efforts of white peoples trying to absorb Native traditions into other religions or to "become Indian" in superficial ways through weekend workshops' (Versluis 1996, 88) or in order to make a profit, has led to the Native peoples becoming even more guarded and practicing their beliefs in private so they are not further corrupted or lost. 'The New Age movement, in this view, becomes one more form of spiritual intrusion, one more process of ritual desecration, of self-conscious appropriation and alteration of the spiritual lives of native peoples' (Neizen and Burgess 2000, 7).

These attempts by non-indigenous American peoples and many others from various Western cultures now trying to assimilate aspects of Native tradition because of a 'lack of life tradition in

these modern peoples lives' (Versluis 1996, 88) is again causing cultural and spiritual disruption to the Native peoples. For the Native American peoples it is akin to history repeating itself, bringing with it another wave of cultural and spiritual genocide.

Left undisturbed, the Native peoples may eventually reclaim what remains of their past and rebuild their future. This is not an impossibility, current research indicates that in areas where traditional rituals are being reintroduced a 'positive impact on reversing many of the negative influences' of colonial contact is occurring (French 2008, 155). For the sake of the Native American peoples let us hope this continues and leads to the long overdue, upward process of healing, re-instilling of personal identity, religion and spiritual growth.

This paper has discussed some elements of Native American spirituality and sacred practices. The paper has also explored the relationship between the Native peoples and European Colonialists, concluding that this contact has been extremely negative to the Native peoples and their way of life. It has highlighted the struggles of the Native American peoples not just upon initial contact, but the challenges they continue to face as a result of colonisation. In addition, the paper has also considered other modern threats, beyond those of colonisation, affecting the Native American peoples. In summation, the discussion demonstrates that colonial contact has indeed negatively affected the cultural heritage of the Native American peoples and still continues to do so. As a result of this impact, along with those from newer challenges, the Native American peoples are understandably becoming more guarded and protective about preserving what little they have remaining of their beliefs and practices.

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