

Native America in the 21st Century

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By

Jerry Hollingsworth

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This book is dedicated to the founder and President of McMurry University, James Winford Hunt (1875–1934), a Methodist minister who grew up on the Kaw Reservation in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma.

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I am also indebted to a number of cultural centers who allowed me to utilize their archives in order to get a closer look at Native American stories and related U.S. Government policies, including the Indian Removal Act of 1830, as well as the data that was made available. Those organizations include: the Cherokee Heritage Center in Tahlequah, Oklahoma; the Seminole Nation Museum; and the Chickasaw Cultural Center.

As always, I am indebted to my wife who has always been there for me.

INTRODUCTION

Native America in the 21st Century is a project based on several years of extensive fieldwork in Native America aimed at shedding light on the most common social conditions in the Native American world in the twenty-first century. The project targets two of the largest Native American reservations in the United States, specifically the Navajo Reservation in the Four Corners area of the United States, which includes New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah; and the Native Americans from the Pine Ridge Reservation and the nearby Rosebud Reservation in remote South Dakota where the Sioux (Lakota) are located.

Other Native American groups included in the study are the Native Americans now living in Oklahoma, known as the Five Civilized Tribes. These Native American groups include the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, the Creeks, and the Seminole. This project also compares the Five Civilized Tribes to those Native Americans living on reservations. While there are some similarities between their situations, both past and present, some basic differences persist. This study seeks to understand and document those differences by studying their history during the twentieth history and analyzing which groups are more functional (assimilated) in the twenty-first century.

Methodology

Fieldwork for this ethnographic project consisted of general observations, participant observations, interviews, conversations, and extensive journaling of data. It also contains a significant amount of secondary analysis and historical record gathering where applicable, especially census data and economic strategy reports, as well as other reliable secondary sources, such as data from the Department of Health and Human Services, the American Diabetes Association, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), tribal websites, and information gathered at Native American cultural centers in the Southwest and all through the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and South Dakota.

During this project, I traveled extensively through Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma, and made contact with a number of museums and Native American cultural

centers, including the Cherokee Heritage Center (the Headquarters of the Cherokee Nation) in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the Five Civilized Tribes Museum in Muskogee, Oklahoma, the Chickasaw Cultural Center located in Sulphur, Oklahoma, and the Choctaw center in Durant, Oklahoma. In the Southwest, I visited the Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Navajo Museum in Window Rock, Arizona, the Comanche Museum in Lawton, Oklahoma, and the Museum of the Great Plains in Lawton, Oklahoma.

Throughout this book, the word “Indian” will not be used, except when citing original sources or when referring to titles, names of facilities, or other such instances where it has become an accepted practice, label, or report. The term “Native American” will be used whenever possible. This is intended as a show of respect, not just political correctness.

Throughout this project, I will be presenting what I refer to as a comparative ethnography, in which I will be analyzing several distinct cultural traditions in an attempt to find similarities and disparities as to the success or lack of success of assimilation among Native Americans in the twenty-first century. The main theme, however, is to examine the social conditions prevalent in Native America in the twenty-first century. As a sociologist, I prefer the term “Cultural Sociology” to describe this process, as most of my training lies within three distinct fields: Anthropology, Sociology, and Social Work. My doctoral training was extensive in the field of human development and child and family studies. This background allows me to view cultures through several different lenses in order to grasp a more applicable picture.

Social Conditions and Social Problems

Social problems exist in every culture. But in the United States, one of the most overlooked and ignored populations is the Native Americans, especially those living on reservations in the remote parts of the country, such as the Navajo Reservation and the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

To a greater or lesser extent, all the Native American cultures in this study have experienced difficulties and mistreatment over the past century in conflicts with white society. The question, then, becomes significant as to how they are coping in the twenty-first century, specifically in the following areas:

- Health
- Education

- Unemployment
- Crime
- Economics
- Poverty
- Racism and discrimination.

Ethnographies

Ethnography gives us an excuse to get close to the action and to understand and observe different cultures. This social science research method is closely associated with anthropology and sociology, though not exclusive to them, and provides a detailed description of a culture from the viewpoint of a researcher who chooses “fieldwork” for a laboratory.

Ethnographic research provides richly detailed and descriptive approaches which set the background for the comparative work to be utilized in this project. My influences have been several notable figures in the fields of both anthropology and sociology, including the great Margaret Mead, the ever-controversial Oscar Lewis, and, from Sociology, Irving Goffman. All of these great thinkers have influenced my academic focus today.

This book consists of several chapters of general information about Native America, such as the assimilation of Native America by force, failed American policies regarding Native America, and the politics surrounding the treatment of Native Americans through the formative years of America’s expansion to the west. Statistics will be provided regarding crime and Native America, and there will be discussion of some general social conditions and special concerns for Native Americans in the twenty-first century. Another main topic covered in the book is the use of Native American mascots by schools, universities, and professional athletic organizations. Detailed information will also be presented on education, health and nutrition, economics, poverty, racial discrimination, and unemployment. An epilogue will follow with some personal observations as well as insights not covered in the main text.

Sociological Analysis of Native America

Sociology actually became a social science by examining the social changes that came about during the Industrial Revolution in the early nineteenth century in Europe. During this time, the Industrial Revolution was changing Europe’s rural societies into societies that were increasingly

urbanized and industrialized, and drastically changing many people's lifestyles in the process.

For many, urbanization and industrialization brought technological changes that raised their standard of living. They also brought many disruptions. People moved to large communities and became isolated from family and friends. Changes in technology and values destroyed traditional beliefs and customs. Urbanization and industrialization brought about dramatic increases in a variety of social conditions, including crime, violence, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and homelessness.

Native Americans have been subjected to the same disruptions in their lives over the course of several centuries, firstly at the hands of Europeans, starting with Christopher Columbus, Hernando Cortez, and many others who came here to the New World, and subsequently at the hands of Americans who spent a good part of the nineteenth century conquering Native Americans, forcibly removing them from their homelands, placing them on reservations, and deliberately trying to destroy their culture and way of life through the boarding school policies of the 1920s. Have these disruptions caused detrimental social conditions in the United States for Native Americans in the twenty-first century? Has Native America actually assimilated as a result of the forced assimilation policies of the U.S. Government? This book will take a hard look, up-close and personal, at the social conditions faced by many Native Americans today.

PART I

EARLY NATIVE AMERICA: RELIGION, CULTURE, AND AMERICAN INDIAN POLICY

CHAPTER ONE

WHO ARE THE NATIVE AMERICANS?

When Columbus landed and claimed the New World for Spain, it was at once the most monumental discovery of any explorer in history, and at the same time, the most devastating event for the people that were already living in the Americas. Columbus, of course, thought he was in India, and so he labeled the Native Americans “Indians.” This new era proved to be the most debilitating time in the history of Native America. European exploration had devastating consequences, beginning with the introduction of European diseases that took their toll on Native Americans who had no immunity to such things as small pox, influenza, measles, and chicken pox. In fact, according to Charles Mann, there were possibly more than 150 million Native Americans living in North and South America when Columbus arrived. However, 90 percent of them would die within a short period of time from various European diseases.¹ Columbus began exploiting Native Americans right from the beginning when he landed in the Bahamian Islands. It has been recorded that when Columbus landed, the Arawaks ran out to greet him, carrying parrots and balls of cotton, and were remarkable for their hospitality. It would not be long before Columbus would ask the question: “Where is the gold?” What would soon follow was Arawaks being taken prisoner to show where the gold was. The new arrivals took Native Americans as slaves, raped them, murdered them, and infected them with their diseases, from which the Native Americans had no immunity.² One of the most interesting debates in the scholarly world today still remains: Who were the first Americans? Where did they come from, and when did they first get here? There are no easy answers, but there are some interesting early theories, and more logical ones are surfacing as scientists continue to work on these questions.

¹ Mann, Charles (2005). 1491: New Revolutions of the Americans before Columbus. Knopf. New York.

² Zinn, Howard (1980). A People’s History of the United States. Harper Collins. New York.

The Ten Lost Tribes of Israel

The indigenous tribes of the New World have been a source of fascination not only for modern scholars, but for early American colonists as well. For hundreds of years, historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and clergymen have argued over the origins of the diverse Native American tribes that once encompassed the entire face of North, Central, and South America. Even in our modern society, scholars of all types continue to argue over the origins of the indigenous tribes of the Americas, despite advances in genetics, cultural anthropology, and history. Perhaps the most provocative of all the theories regarding the origins of Native American tribes is the belief that they could somehow be linked to the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Ten of the original twelve Hebrew tribes, under the leadership of Joshua, took possession of Canaan, the Promised Land, after the death of Moses. They were named Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, and Zebulun—all sons or grandsons of Jacob. In 930 BC, the Ten Tribes formed the independent Kingdom of Israel in the north and the two other tribes, Judah and Benjamin, set up the Kingdom of Judah in the south. Following the conquest of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 721 BC, the Ten Tribes were gradually assimilated by other peoples and thus disappeared from history. Nevertheless, a belief persisted that one day the Ten Lost Tribes would be found.

After the American Revolution, the fascination with Native American origins was carried to new heights. Despite the fact that no obvious proof could be found to substantiate the claim that Native Americans were the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, scores of religious zealots hoped to uncover proof for this claim. One such scholar was Lord Edward Kingsborough. Kingsborough was born in 1795, the firstborn heir to an Irish Earl. While later studying at Oxford University, he became fascinated by the Bodley Codex in the Oxford Library and became convinced that ancient Mexicans were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. Kingsborough, after seeing a Mayan Codex manuscript, devoted his life to the study of the antiquities of Mexico. He employed Italian painter Augustine Aglio to visit national and royal libraries throughout Europe in search of Mexican manuscripts which Aglio then sketched and later lithographed for publication. Kingsborough then spent his entire life trying to prove the Jewish origin of ancient Mexico. He compiled texts, manuscripts, and hundreds of engravings. In his famous book, *The History of the American Indians*, eighteenth-century explorer and trader, James Adair, stated that several hundred Cherokees, living in the North Carolina Mountains, spoke an ancient Jewish language

that was nearly intelligible to Jews from England and Holland. From this observation, Adair extrapolated a belief that all Native Americans were the descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.³

Adair genuinely admired Native Americans and was married to a Chickasaw woman. However, his popular theory was twisted during the American Revolution into a new version in which the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel had built the thousands of mounds that dotted the landscape of southeastern North America, but the Indians had killed all the “civilized Jews.” Frontier preachers gave sermons which demanded that their parishioners go out and slaughter the evil savages who had killed the civilized Jews. Many of the books published on the American Indians claimed a possible tie to the Lost Tribes of Israel. The *Book of Mormon* follows this same idea and claims that the main group in the story are Israelites from Jerusalem. Joseph Smith claimed to have received a vision concerning the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel and the connection to Native Americans. His vision was:

“And it came to pass when I was seventeen years of age, I called again upon the Lord and he showed unto me a heavenly vision. For behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before me. It was by night and he called me by name and he said the Lord had forgiven me my sins. He revealed unto me that in the town of Manchester, Ontario County, New York there was plates of gold upon which there was engravings which was engraven by Moroni and his fathers the servants of the living God in ancient days deposited by the commandments of God and kept by the power thereof and that I should go and get them. He revealed unto me many things concerning the inhabitants of the earth which since have been revealed in commandments and revelations.”⁴

Joseph Smith was specific in explaining that the plates he found and later translated were the records of the first Americans, and that they were about the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Much controversy, of course, resulted after examining the texts, but the archaeological finds and sites in North America pre-dated Mormon claims by several thousand years. No record of any Hebrew languages, artifacts, writings, or references has been found in the New World that would substantiate these claims. There is thus no evidence to support this particular theory of who the earliest inhabitants of the New World were, or where they came from.

³ Adair, James (1775). *The History of the American Indians*. Edward and Charles Dilly. London

⁴ *The Book of Mormon*.

The Bering Strait Theory

The oldest known theory, and the one still held by most scholars, is the “Bering Strait Land Bridge Theory.” According to this popular notion, humans crossed the Siberian Strait some 13,500 years ago, following an ice-free corridor across Siberia and onto the North American continent through what is today Alaska. According to this theory, at least three different migrations from Siberia to the Americas are highly likely to have occurred. The first wave came into a land populated by the large mammals of the late Pleistocene (the last ice age), including mammoths, horses, giant sloths, and woolly Rhinoceroses. This wave eventually spread over the entire hemisphere, as far south as Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America. This group of people is commonly known today as the *Clovis Culture*. The Clovis Culture is a prehistoric Native American culture that first appears in the archaeological record of North America around 13,500 years ago, at the end of the last ice age. The culture is named for artifacts found near Clovis, New Mexico, where the first evidence of complex tools was excavated in 1932. This early evidence of the Clovis Culture is manifested by the remains of a mammoth with the famous Clovis spear point embedded in its ribs. Clovis sites such as these have since been identified throughout all of the contiguous United States, as well as in Mexico and Central America. While the Bering Strait Theory has been one of the most widely accepted theories, there are some major problems associated with it. For example, the Monte Verde site in Chile has been dated over a thousand years earlier than any Clovis site in North America, and may even date as far back as 30,000 years ago. Currently, there are at least 28 different sites that are now labeled “pre-Clovis” in North America alone. Recently, in Washington State, an analysis of a bone joint fragment from a 13,800-year-old Mastodon at the *Manis* site has confirmed that ancient hunters were in North America at least 800 years earlier than the Clovis people.⁵

Judging from sites on the North American Great Plains, the Clovis people were skilled hunters of large animals, especially ice-age mammoths and mastodons. A single animal could provide meat for weeks on end, and, if dried, for much of the winter as well. The hides, tusks, bones, and pelts were used to make household possessions and subsistence tools, and were also used for shelter and even clothing. The early Clovis hunters were the manufacturers of one of the deadliest spear points used for

⁵ American Archaeology, “Revealing the Past through DNA,” Volume 15, no. 4, 2011–2012.

bringing down early ice-age mammals like the Columbian Mammoth and the Mastodon, both of which stood over 14 feet tall and weighed approximately ten tons. Clovis points are wholly distinctive. Chipped from jasper, chert, obsidian, and other fine, brittle stone, they have a lance-shaped tip and (sometimes) wickedly sharp edges. Most theorists that adhere to the “Clovis First” theory maintain that the Clovis point is the first American invention, but other scientists have proposed alternative theories to the peopling of the Americas. Other theories suggest that the Clovis point may not be the first American invention, but that it was a development of an even earlier style.

The Solutrean Hypothesis

Dennis Stanford from the Smithsonian Institute has researched the plausibility of an alternative theory regarding the first Americans. His theory, known as the “Solutrean Hypothesis,” states that the first Americans could have come from Europe. Stanford proposes that stone tool technology of the Solutrean culture in prehistoric Europe may have later influenced the development of the Clovis tool-making culture in the Americas, and that people from Europe may have been among the earliest settlers in the Americas. In this hypothesis, people associated with the Solutrean culture may have migrated from ice-age Europe (France and Spain) to North America, bringing their methods of making stone tools with them and providing the basis for later Clovis technology found throughout North America. The hypothesis rests upon particular similarities in Solutrean and Clovis technology that have no known counterparts in Eastern Asia, Siberia, or Beringia—areas from which or through which early Americans are thought to have migrated.

At the core of Stanford’s case are stone tools recovered from five Mid-Atlantic sites, two of which lie on Chesapeake Bay islands, suggesting that the Solutreans settled Delmarva early on. Smithsonian research associate Darrin Lowrey found blades, anvils, and other tools stuck in soil at least 20,000 years old. Further, the eastern shore blades strongly resemble those found at dozens of Solutrean sites from the Stone Age in Spain and France. Stanford says: “We can match each one of 18 styles up to the sites in Europe.” Stone tools recovered from two other Mid-Atlantic sites—Cactus Hills, Va., 45 miles south of Richmond, and Meadowcroft Rock shelter, in southern Pennsylvania—date back to at least 16,000 years ago. Those tools, too, strongly resemble blades found in Europe. The most common argument against the Solutrean Hypothesis, is that there is no direct evidence of migration in the form of boats or canoes. Stanford

counters this argument by saying that most of that evidence would have been lost when the ice age ended and caused sea levels to rise by 300–400 feet. He also suggests that the travelers may have chosen a lifestyle similar to the Inuit, who hunted and traveled along ice packs close to the shore, living off seals and other animal life.

South American Entry

The evidence of other, very ancient pre-Clovis cultures in South America and more recent pre-Clovis settlements in North America has led some researchers to suggest that the first wave of settlements took place prior to the most recent ice age. These first peoples may have entered as early as 35,000 years ago either overland or (perhaps more likely) by boat along the coast and up the rivers. In comparison, current evidence suggests Australia may have been settled using boats as early as 60,000 years ago. Early settlers may have been able to reach the warmer regions of Central and South America before the climate cooled. As the northern continent became covered in ice once again around 25,000 years ago, settlements would have been located primarily in the southern continent. As the ice receded around 11,000 years ago, they would have trekked north, as new people from Eastern Asia descended from Beringia at the same time.

DNA Findings

According to *National Geographic*, the DNA recently harvested from the remains of an infant—which experts determined belonged to a young boy about one and a half years old—buried 13,000 years ago, confirms that the earliest widespread culture in North America was descended from humans who crossed over to the New World from Asia. This research strongly suggests that contemporary Native Americans are direct descendants of the Clovis people.

“The new scientific DNA findings strongly refute the idea of the Solutrean Hypothesis,” said study co-author Michael Waters, director of the Center for the Study of the First Americans at Texas A&M University. “This shows very clearly that the ancestry of the very first Americans can be traced back to Asia.”⁶ Comparison studies of the ancient DNA showed that it was similar to the genomes of ancient peoples living in Siberia and the ancestors of East Asians. The team also discovered a deep genetic

⁶ National Geographic: “Oldest Burial Yields DNA Evidence of First Americans,” 2014 by Ker Than.

affinity between the infant's genetic material and that of 52 Native American populations living in South America and Canada. The skeleton of the Clovis child was discovered in 1968 at the Anzick burial site in western Montana. Dozens of ochre-covered stone tools found at the site were consistent with Clovis technology, and radiocarbon dating revealed that the skeleton was approximately 12,600 years old. There is something of interest in all these theories that seek to explain the first peoples of America, but most fall short due to lack of evidence. While most of the evidence supporting the Bering Strait Land Bridge Theory is still the strongest available scientific information we have, it does not mean that it is the only legitimate theory. As more theories are investigated, however, most of the evidence still supports the land bridge crossing. Many questions still remain regarding the supposedly pre-Clovis finds, however. When older sites are found in South America that pre-date Clovis by a large margin, one must seriously consider that an alternative route was used much earlier and may well have given rise to an earlier migration to South America. However, according to most experts, there are no claims of human settlement earlier than 20,000 years.

After Clovis

Eventually, the great mammoths and mastodons became extinct, either because of overhunting by the Clovis people, or an intense climate change. By around 9000 BC, grasslands became prominent, extending from the frontiers of Alaska to the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, forming what is known as the "Great Bison Belt." This region lay just east of the Rocky Mountains and the grasses remained short and much of their nutrients were found below the surface, ideal for bison to feed on.

By 8500 BC, Paleo Indians had narrowed their hunting to bison, deer, pronghorn antelope, and other animals.⁷ This began the period which would be referred to as the "Folsom Period." What resulted was very superior hunting techniques using the "Folsom Point," which was fluted down the middle and apparently notched onto a shaft, or spear, and more than likely, an atlatl, which would have given the hunter a more forceful throw at an animal. The Folsom tradition would mark the beginnings of the Plains Indian bison-hunting culture, as these Native Americans migrated across the continent toward the southeast where they eventually gave way to the agricultural people in the Woodlands and to the

⁷ Fagan, Brian (2011). *The First North Americans: An Archaeological Journey*. Thames and Hudson. London.

Mississippian cultures as they settled near rivers. The great “Mound Builder” culture would later rise, and would contain large ceremonial centers, villages, and population centers. The cultivation of maize began and the people became dependent on agriculture and hunting for their subsistence. This early agricultural civilization would be called “Mississippian.”

Great cities would arise in the Mississippian area, such as Cahokia that supported over 35,000 people, with an advanced religion, earthen pyramids, burial mounds, plazas, and ball courts. In the great southwestern parts of what is today the United States (and used to be Mexico) we see the great Anasazi civilization rising, with Chaco Canyon, one of the great cities and cultural areas north of Mexico.

In the area that is now Mexico, the great civilizations that made up the Mesoamerican cultures were taking shape as well, to include the Pyramids of Teotihuacan, the Olmec Civilization, the Mayans, and the Aztecs. In South America, pre-Incan cultures had built temples and pyramids, and the Incas were building massive fortifications and other structures. Teotihuacan was a massive urban city, with temples and pyramids almost the size of the great pyramids of Egypt. At its height, Teotihuacan supported a population of over 200,000.

From their capital, Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs ruled over an empire of millions. The city itself had running water and was larger than any European city at the time. The architecture rivaled anything seen in Europe, and Spaniards thought they were in a dream when they first saw the city. Native Americans in the southeastern part of North America had already established trading networks that extended to the Gulf of Mexico, where they imported sea shells and other items. They would trade for copper in the Great Lakes area, as well as chert, and other resources in the Ozarks. This culture would give rise to some of the largest and most advanced civilizations in continental North America.

In Oklahoma, just outside the present-day city of Fort Smith, Arkansas, a site known as Spiro Mound (the western most outpost of the Mississippian tradition) had boats with sails and room for over 100 warriors. They were trading on an established network that extended as far as the Great Lakes region to the north, the Gulf of Mexico to the south, and all the way to the West Coast.

When Columbus landed, Native Americans had already been here for at least 13,500 years, and maybe even longer. European and later American contact with the Native Americans that had lived on this continent for thousands of years, however, began to fall apart and the lifestyles of those that were already here would soon change forever.

CHAPTER TWO

CULTURE, MYTHS, AND RELIGION IN NATIVE AMERICA

Culture is the knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society. Most sociologists agree that culture is essential for our individual survival and for our communication with other people. It is also essential for the survival of societies.

Basic sociological knowledge indicates that there are two types of culture: material and non-material. Material culture consists of the physical or tangible creations that members of a society make, use, and share.¹ For Native Americans, these material cultural items would include many things, such as sacred pipes, drums, headdresses, feathers, weapons, architecture, or other religious or ceremonial items that each tribe holds sacred.

Non-material culture consists of the abstract or intangible human creations of society that influence people's behavior. Language, beliefs, values, rules of behavior, family patterns, and political systems all make up this type of culture. For Native Americans, this encompasses a myriad of beliefs and values that have existed for hundreds or even thousands of years.

These values can be expressed and reinforced through art, stories, songs, or rituals; language is crucial to the preservation of a culture. The United States Government has adopted policies in the past to eliminate Native American culture, including language, forms of dress, sacred dances, religions, and politics, which make up the principal components of the culture. This started with the military campaigns against Native America, and was followed by policies such as forced assimilation, boarding schools, and forced removal from their original homelands.

¹ Kendal, Diane (2005). *Sociology in our Times*, 5th edition. Thompson and Wadsworth. Belmont, Ca., pp. 78–79.

Many tribes lost some of their culture in the 500 years following their first contact with Europeans, but most tribes did try and retain their most important cultural expressions. Today, many tribes are seeing a rebirth in their art, stories, and rituals, as well as languages that had almost vanished. Many tribal religious practices were tied to specific locations that had strong spiritual and sacred meaning. The removal of tribes from traditional lands to reservations cut them off from the source of many of their ceremonial rituals.

Language

Language is one of the most important elements in preserving Native American cultures. When the Europeans arrived on the North American continent, there were hundreds of languages spoken. In 1995, there were only 175 that were still being spoken, and only 20 of them were being taught to children within the native community. Others survived just long enough to be described and recorded by twentieth-century linguists.

A statement by the *Indian Country Diaries* argues that “the death of a native language matters most because that language is part of the rooted identity of the members of that tribe.” The loss of the language means that ceremonies are no longer performed in the language. Stories are no longer told. Even if the stories have been translated into English, much of the meaning has been lost. There are concepts that don’t translate into English. A native person’s unique way of understanding the world has been lost.²

The Role of Mythology in Native American Culture

Mythology is central to any understanding of Native American culture. This includes the people’s religious beliefs, origin myths, creation myths, and spiritual understanding of their world. From the myths, stories, and religions we come away with a greater understanding of the culture of different groups, nations, and tribes. The making of myths is universal among human cultures. In fact, myths are a necessity. Primal groups find them vital for the maintenance of the patterns of group life. Among Australian Aborigines, for example, myths are invoked to explain and give weight to a supernatural origin and authority to the customs, ceremonies, and beliefs of the tribe. This is a major aspect of ritual development.

Native Americans are descendants of very ancient cultures, dating back at least 13,500 years, or even longer. Research and DNA examination have

² Indian Country Diaries (Sept. 2016). Native American Telecommunications.

proven in several cases that most Native American groups are descended from the Clovis Culture. The power of myths and legends is part of a cultural heritage that has kept tribes connected to a world much larger than themselves. Myth is the structure of most of these Native American groups. Can we be so surprised today, that Native Americans are working toward preserving those ancient ways of life? They connect them to their past, and to ways of life that still linger in their psyche.

Another interesting phenomenon about studying mythology among indigenous groups is that we find many similar stories. Comparative studies enable us to see a number of similarities among groups that lead us back to an ancient beginning. Human societies all have one thing in common: we all have myths and origin stories, as well as creation stories. The Native Americans are no different, and when we take a closer look at some of those myths, we see similarities to our own cultures.

Joseph Campbell stated that the guiding idea of his work was to find “the commonality of themes in world myths, pointing to a constant requirement in the human psyche for centering in terms of deep principles.” He stated in his work that “mythology was an interior road map of experience, drawn by people who have traveled it.” He went on to say that this “grand and cacophonous chorus began when our primal ancestors told stories to themselves about the animals that they killed for food and about the supernatural world to which the animals seemed to go when they died. As these primal folk turned from hunting to planting, the stories they told to interpret the mysteries of life changed too. Now the seed became the magic symbol of the endless cycle. The plant died, and was buried and its seed was born again.”³

Over and over again, once we explore the nature of primitive society, we see the act of “renewal” as a central focus of their lives, religion, and spiritual beliefs. It is difficult to comprehend some of the ancient practices, such as human sacrifice, without understanding that sense of renewal. For example, the Maya believed that they had to give blood back to the gods because their gods had created them using their own blood. Their religion depended on understanding ancient mythological beginnings. The Aztecs also practiced human sacrifice because they believed that without these sacred rituals, the sun would not rise. These acts all symbolize birth, creation, and renewal.

Mythology, as defined by the *New World Encyclopedia*, refers to a body of stories that attempt to explain the origins and fundamental values of a given culture and the nature of the universe and humanity. In modern

³ Campbell, Joseph (1988). *The Power of Myth*. Anchor Books. New York.

usage, the term can also mean stories that a particular culture believes to be true and that use the supernatural to interpret natural events. Ancient myths are generally founded by imagination and intuition rather than objective evidence. Myths help explain human propensities and natural phenomena and identify them with the actions and attributes of gods in a primordial past.

According to some experts, myths reveal the world of gods and the cosmic order through which the social order and cultural values of a society are confirmed. Several scholars have immersed themselves in the study of North American myths. D.G. Brinton was an early pioneer in the field of ethnology, and produced such works as *American Hero Myths: A Study in the Native Religions of the Western Continent*. In 1879, the *Bureau of Ethnology* was formed, and afterward, many anthropology departments were formed and it became a legitimate field of study. Most of the work performed in this early period was the collection of information concerning those cultures who seemed to be disappearing or vanishing. During this time, Brinton published over twenty books on the mythology and folklore of Native Americans. He became an expert on the linguistics of Native America, and also became a pioneer in that field. Brinton also became interested in studying the similarities of myths among Native Americans. He had stated that: "The explanation of such parallels has exercised the minds of students of mythology and folklore. There are those that would see in them sufficient evidence of former contact, and transference, while another school believes that unless there is precise proof of connection in the tale itself or from other sources, it is more likely that the true explanation lies in the oneness of the human mind, the narrow limits in which it works in primitive conditions, and the almost fatal certainty with which it will seek the same concrete forms under which to convey a given abstract idea."⁴

Supreme Beings, Creation Myths, and Religion

It is common all through Native America, as it is in many other cultures, to believe in a supreme being. The Mayans had a pantheon of hundreds of gods and goddesses. The Greeks and Romans also had a large pantheon of deities that existed for different purposes. Commonly, Supreme Beings existed in the sky, or at a great distance, and had made

⁴ Brinton, D.G. (1896). *The Myths of the New World: A Treatise on the Symbolism and Mythology of the Red Race of America*. David McKay, Publisher. Philadelphia.

everything, including people, animals, the earth, and the universe in general.

The idea of a great “originator” rose naturally from questions in humanity such as: “Who is responsible for creating everything?” Unable to think of any other explanation, it became possible to imagine a being behind the creation of everything and everybody. Regardless of what powers the deities may or may not have had, we do see the result in inventing a form of worship that included such rites as purification ceremonies. Native Americans are famous for purification rites in the form of emetics, which made them throw up in order to cleanse the body. Sweat lodges were used in the same way. Such religious practices also lead to the making of sacrifices, and offerings.

While mythology in Native America is important, some of the most important myths are the creation myths. All Native American groups, tribes, and nations have these creation myths. These are referred to in the scholarly literature as “cosmogonic” myths.

Some of these myths exist in order to understand why the earth is so suited to human habitation. Someone, perhaps the high god or a cultural hero, dove into waters to bring up the sand and the mud, with which the habitable earth was made, or fought with giants or demons, or emerged from an underground cave. In some creation myths, we see extreme similarities, or parallel myths across the diverse world of Native Americans.

A creation myth is a symbolic narrative of how the world began and how people first came to inhabit it. Cultures generally regard their creation myths as true. In the society in which it is told, a creation myth is usually regarded as conveying profound truths metaphorically, symbolically, and sometimes in a historical or literal sense. They are commonly, although not always, considered cosmological myths, that is, they describe the ordering of the universe from a state of chaos or amorphousness.

Creation myths often share a number of similar features. They are often considered sacred accounts and can be found in nearly all known religious traditions. They are stories with a plot, and characters who are deities, human-like figures, or animals, who often speak and transform easily. Creation myths address questions deeply meaningful to the society that shares them, revealing their central worldview and the framework for the self-identity of the culture and individual in a universal context.

Stephen Kershaw states: “Creation myths, which tell of the origin of the world and the gods, are essential features of the mythologies of many cultures, and the Greek tradition is definitively expounded in the writings

of Hesiod (c. 700), whose crucial work is an epic poem called the *Theogony* (The Origin and Descent of the Gods).⁵

In the South American cultural tradition, religious beliefs and deities are intimately linked with the forces of nature. The Inca peoples explained their origins by connecting themselves to such things as the sun God Inti. Survival to most ancient Andean peoples depended on revering the gods and appeasing them through rituals, sacrifices, and offerings. Their ancient belief system grew from a desire to explain the mystery of life and the meaning of death.⁶

Importance of Religion

Some early scholars in Europe concentrated on the importance of religion in society. A sociological approach emerged in Europe with the work of Emile Durkheim in France. His study of religion was an approach to understanding what role religion plays in society. Durkheim concluded that, when people worship deities or spirits, they are in reality worshiping their own society. He reached this conclusion by first assuming, as do most sociologists, that society has an enormous impact on people. Society provides us with language, tools, norms, values, a name, kinship, all of which make up a “culture.” It is those provisions, made available by society, that enable us to make our journey through life. Without society and the things it provides, we would not survive.⁷

Some of the most important points about religion, Durkheim noted, are the following:

- Religion enhances social solidarity by establishing and reinforcing fundamental cultural values. Religious rituals are very important in this regard. By coming together periodically for public rituals, people can maintain a sense of common identity and shared purpose. This is what Durkheim referred to as “moral community.”
- Religion also offers a sacred legitimation of values and social practices.

⁵ Kershaw, Stephen (2007). *The Greek Myths: Gods, Monsters, Heroes, and the Origins of Storytelling*. Constable & Robinson Ltd. London.

⁶ Jones, David (2008). *The Myths and Religion of the Incas*. Annes Publishing. London.

⁷ Durkheim, E. (1915). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, translated by Joseph Ward Swain. Allen and Ewin. London.