

6

Many issues and elements—including ethnic nomenclature, racial attitudes, and the legal and political status of American Indian nations and Indian people— influence Native American identity.

Native American Identity

Perry G. Horse (Kiowa)

“Some day we’re all going to be like white people,” my grandmother said in 1950. She noticed that the young people chose not to speak our native Kiowa language. She commented on the change in our diet from traditional foods to prepackaged goods. Popular American culture became dominant in daily life. More Kiowas were intermarrying with whites and into other tribes. Fifty-four years later I look around and think we may not be white people but indeed we are more like them. We emulate their ways. We are educated in their schooling system. We can speak and write like them. We have adopted their form of government. We perform their dance and music. We hold jobs and make mortgage and car payments. We are consumers. We enjoy the comforts of modern life. We attend mainstream universities. In many ways we have assimilated into the dominant culture. On the surface it seems we are indeed like them.

Be that as it may, we are still the original Native people of North America. We are Kiowa, Navajo, Comanche, Apache, Wichita, and so on down the list of five hundred or more Indian tribes. We cling to that distinction consciously and unconsciously. That realization, that consciousness, is where Native American identity begins. As Native American people we inherit an innate sensibility about the world that originated far back in our ancestral past. That consciousness, that psychology if you will, developed separately and apart from the experience of other peoples who were not indigenous to this land. It is a worldview that is inherent in Native American tribal traditions, most of which were handed down orally in the tribal languages.

Native American identity is multifaceted. Many issues or elements (such as ethnic nomenclature, racial attitudes, the legal and political status

of American Indian nations and American Indian people, cultural change, and one's sensibility about what being a Native American means in today's society) influence Native American identity. In this chapter I share some insights about these issues and elements. Such insights are informed by my own experience and from interaction with Native American people of all backgrounds in Indian country.¹ I will then summarize how student affairs professionals may be able to use this information when working with students who are Native American.

Ethnic Nomenclature

American Indian, Indian, or Native American—which is it? My generation, those born just ahead of the so-called baby boomers, grew up American Indian. That is, we became accustomed to identifying with the ethnic descriptor *American Indian*. As a generic descriptor, it was convenient and readily recognizable. All the major organizations that dealt with Indian issues carried that designation. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs is one example. The U.S. Indian Health Service is another. It was not just agencies of the U.S. government but also the National Congress of American Indians, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, and the American Indian College Fund. American Indian studies departments in various universities were another example of organizations that preferred to use the designation of *American Indian*. So is it simply a matter of preference whether one uses *American Indian* or *Native American* in one's identity equation? Does it really matter?

I do not argue for one over the other. All I know is that when I hear the term *American Indian*, I immediately think of people like myself who are citizens of America's indigenous nations. When I hear the term *Native American*, I pause ever so slightly. I know that term includes me because I was born in this country, and I am an American citizen by dint of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. I know too that anyone born in this country can rightfully claim to be a native American.

What we are dealing with here are the peculiarities of linguistic meaning. There is a great deal of arbitrariness in the meanings associated with words. That is, the connection we associate with particular words is not an a priori connection. Rather, it is through agreement and usage among speakers of a given language that words acquire their meaning. So if we all agree to substitute *Native American* for *American Indian*, or to use the terms interchangeably, then we make a meaningful connection. Aside from that, it seems to be largely a matter of preference.

Racial Attitudes

In the past seven years, I have attended four national conferences on ethnicity, race, and identity.² Of the dozens of topics, workshops, and keynote speakers, the one that stands out in my mind dealt with the notion of white

privilege. That term grew out of the identity movement in the late twentieth century. Those who coined the term were white scholars who approached ethnic studies by looking in the mirror to examine closely what it really means to be white in America. It was their attempt to understand and explain how race and racism in the United States affected white people.

Why should the study of whiteness be of interest to non-whites? To me, it goes to the matter of root cause. For American Indians, it puts a racial face on anti-Indian ideas such as manifest destiny. More to the point of our discussion, it sets the stage for a better understanding of our need for American Indian identity in the first place.

Jensen (1998, p. C1) has noted that "White privilege, like any social phenomenon, is complex. In a White supremacist culture, all White people have privilege, whether or not they are overtly racist themselves. There are general patterns, but such privilege plays out differently depending on context and other aspects of one's identity." Moreover, he points out that such privilege is unearned. Merely being white is sufficient in a world run mostly by white people.

White privilege is synonymous with dominance in a racially stratified society that is based on oppression. Any form of oppression, such as racism or sexism, is a relationship between a dominant, powerful group and a subordinated or oppressed group. To be white in such a society is to be privileged. All others are then underprivileged by definition, or so it would seem.

If we accept that American Indians have been or are oppressed, part of our identity is already subordinated. We consciously or unconsciously take on the characteristics of the oppressors. We favor the speaking of their language over our own Native American languages. We adopt their religious beliefs and practices. We emulate their forms of government and schooling. Some might say this is merely adaptive behavior for the sake of survival. Others would say it is part of a natural cycle of change.

Legal and Political Status

The legal and political status of American Indians in this country is what truly sets Indians apart from other U.S. citizens. The commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution authorizes the government to conduct business with American Indian nations on a government-to-government basis. Treaties between the United States and tribes remain in effect, and current federal American Indian policy acknowledges the sovereign status of tribal governments.

Under tribal sovereignty, tribal governments are the sole authority that can determine who is or is not a member, or citizen, of a given tribal nation. Each tribe maintains enrollment records. Thus if one seeks legal status as an American Indian, one must obtain tribal recognition as such. In the American Indian world, it is common to identify first with one's tribal affiliation and secondarily as American Indian or Native American. Within the tribe one's recognition is validated in various ways: parentage,

clan relationships, kinship patterns, descendant status, one's individual tribal name, and other community-based norms. Merely declaring oneself to be American Indian without any of these will be transparent to those with authentic status as American Indian or tribal people.

I feel I am Kiowa because I have direct experience as such, including competence in speaking and understanding the language. On the other hand, if the Kiowa Business Council decided to remove me from the tribal rolls, I would lose my legal status as a tribal citizen. Although I like to think that this would be highly unlikely, it underscores an important point in the American Indian identity equation. Tribal governments, not individuals, determine one's legal status as an American Indian. This is important because tribal governments also have the power, if they so choose, to do away with the current identity benchmark of blood quantum.

I doubt that there is such a thing as degree of Indianness. Yet the federal government introduced the idea of degree of American Indian blood into our consciousness. The so-called Certificate of Indian Blood, which is necessary for obtaining certain forms of assistance, is an outgrowth of that proposition.³ Legally, Indianness is a political proposition. It is a matter of citizenship in a given tribe. However, all tribes assess one's tribal membership eligibility based on blood quantum.

Non-Indians and American Indians alike sometimes misunderstand tribal sovereignty. Sovereignty is vested in the body politic of the tribe as a whole, not in individuals. Neither is sovereignty given or bestowed from one government to another. It is an inherent aspect of nationhood. Nations are free to recognize one another and to make treaties with one another. The United States has made treaties with American Indian tribes. Therefore, federal law recognizes those tribes as sovereign entities. It is at the state and local levels that tribal sovereignty is most often questioned or challenged in terms of jurisdictional disputes.

If tribal governments determine one's legal eligibility for recognition as an American Indian, or tribal member, then who recognizes the tribes? As we have already seen, tribes that made treaties with the United States are by virtue of those treaties federally recognized tribes. Also, state governments recognize some tribes. Interestingly, it is still possible for nonrecognized groups to petition for federal recognition as has happened recently in New England (see Benedict [2001] for further discussion). Although some observers claim that such groups may not "look Indian," those groups can attain tribal sovereignty with federal recognition and enjoy the same rights and benefits as other tribal nations.

Cultural Change

No culture or language remains static. Change is part of the natural order of things. American Indian cultures have changed and will continue to change over time. To be American Indian one hundred years ago would not

be the same as being American Indian two hundred years ago. In 1803 American Indians in the West freely roamed and occupied their respective territories. By 1903 they were all confined to reservations. We American Indians look back in history and say about our ancestors, "Now, those were real American Indians." Project forward. Might the American Indians of the late twenty-second century say about today's American Indians, "Now, those were real American Indians"? Which leads to the question: What is a real American Indian? Does a static place in history mean anything? Most lay notions of Indianness are part American history, part myth, part ethnology, and part fiction.

Many American Indians feel that we should pay more attention to our own tribal teachings. Indeed, the proliferation of tribal colleges and universities is a manifestation of that concern. The American Indian colleges are also part of an American Indian response to being a colonized people. Where they exist, such colleges acknowledge cultural change while working to forestall further erosion of languages, culture, traditions, and so forth. Redefining what it means to be American Indian in today's society is one of the major issues in Indian country. Part of the American Indian redefinition process is driven, consciously or unconsciously, by the response of American Indians to white privilege.

Personal Sensibility

Ultimately, identity as an American Indian is highly personal. It is a particular way one feels about oneself and one's experience as an American Indian or tribal person. The principles or moral values that guide an individual's actions is that person's consciousness, and groups of people sharing common ethics can also be understood to have a collective consciousness. In an earlier essay (Horse, 2001), I described five influences on American Indian consciousness:

- The extent to which one is grounded in one's Native American language and culture, one's cultural identity
- The validity of one's American Indian genealogy
- The extent to which one holds a traditional American Indian general philosophy or worldview (emphasizing balance and harmony and drawing on Indian spirituality)
- One's self-concept as an American Indian
- One's enrollment (or lack of it) in a tribe

Although there are many threats to cultural transmission for American Indian people (popular press, stereotypes, and so on), I believe that the emergence of American Indian political and economic strength is contributing to the development of an American Indian postcolonial sensibility that is in turn helping support the growth of a renewed American Indian consciousness.

What Are You Anyway?

Those whose ethnic makeup is multicultural often express perplexity, if not frustration, when discussing their racial identity. At the aforementioned identity conferences, such individuals seemed resigned to their situation. However, they also expressed anger that they tend to be singled out with a common question: “What are you anyway?” If one does not clearly exhibit the physical characteristics of a single race, people seem compelled to confront such a person with that question. We should not be surprised that such is the case in a race-conscious society. According to Wijeyesinghe (2001), a key factor for multiracial people is whether they choose their racial identity themselves or whether they allow society or others to assign an identity to them.

Intertribal multicultural persons (American Indians of several tribal combinations) have a somewhat different situation in that they (or their parents) must choose in which tribe to enroll. In addition to the political aspect, such choice can have cultural and economic implications. In actual practice it is usually the parents who must choose. I know from personal experience that this is not easy. The issue is compounded when multitribal persons marry into an entirely different racial group.

Summary

The title of this essay is “Native American Identity,” yet there is no standard descriptor, or nomenclature, for identifying those who call themselves American Indian or Native American. The terms are used interchangeably and seem to be based on preference. Those born before 1950 tend to be comfortable with being called American Indian. Those born later in the twentieth century seem accustomed to the term *Native American*. Readers should note that *Native American* now includes the indigenous people of Alaska, Hawaii, and American Samoa.

American society is racially stratified. White privilege, as white scholars put it, is synonymous with dominance in a white majority society and is based on oppression. All whites, whether or not they are overtly racist, benefit from white privilege. American Indian people struggle to maintain their own identity amid the pressures of adapting to and living in a white-dominated society.

Colonialism is a powerful force that affected American Indian cultures in many ways. However, no culture remains static. In fact, there is much cultural ambiguity among American Indians. In some communities the American Indian response to cultural change has been a deliberate return to traditional tribal knowledge, language, and practices. The establishment of tribal colleges and universities manifests part of that response. Christianity too has played a significant role in cultural change among Native Americans.

There is no such thing as a monolithic American Indian entity. Tribes and American Indian nations are bewildering in their diversity. Yet non-Indians tend to think and act otherwise. One's identity as an American Indian is highly personal. American Indians share some commonalities in terms of social interactions and certain pan-Indian cultural activities such as modern-day intertribal celebrations. However, the practical benchmark for Indianness is the political distinction that tribes enjoy as sovereign nations. Members of tribal nations are thus dual citizens. They are citizens of the United States and of their respective tribal nations. It is not simply a matter of American Indians being just another ethnic minority.

Recommendations

Existing theories and models of racial identity have limitations and strengths. Those who work with Native American students need to keep in mind that American Indian or tribal identity is a personalized process that is influenced by legal and political considerations, psychosocial factors, proximity or access to a given culture, socialization, and one's own sensibility. Models of racial identity proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s, but few have focused on identity development among Indians. I discuss some psychosocial influences on American Indian identity in my 2001 essay, but it is not an identity model as such.

Administrators, teachers, and higher education practitioners who interact professionally with Native American students can assess themselves in terms of their reaction to each of the major points in this essay. If the reader feels challenged by these assertions, that may be a signal to rethink the way one feels, especially about the points on racism and white privilege. With regard to the latter, simply typing in these keywords on any Internet search engine will reveal numerous sources of information, essays, and articles.

Many mainstream colleges and universities now have departments of American Indian studies or something similar. Staff people in such organizations can provide further guidance around Native identity and related issues.

Over a half century has passed since my grandmother lamented the idea of American Indians becoming like white people. Indeed, we now see more evidence of cultural assimilation among American Indians. But that is not the same as identity. Identity, our sense of who we really are, lies in the self-image inherited from our ancestors and passed down along a tribal memory chain. So long as that memory chain remains unbroken, we can stay connected to what our elders called the tribal spirit force. May it always be so!

Notes

1. The term *Indian country* is most usefully defined as "country within which Indian laws and customs and federal laws relating to Indians are generally applicable" (Cohen, 1942, p. 5). This definition includes all territory owned or controlled by Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

2. The Southwest Center for Human Relations, University of Oklahoma, sponsors the annual National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education at different regional locations.

3. The Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), issues the Certificate of Indian Blood; this important document attests to one's degree of American Indian blood and one's membership in a given tribal nation. It is issued based on the records of the BIA field offices that in turn verify one's tribal membership with the tribe concerned.

References

- Benedict, J. *Without Reservation: How a Controversial Indian Tribe Rose to Power and Built the World's Largest Casino*. New York: Perennial, 2001.
- Cohen, F. S. *Handbook of Federal Indian Law*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1942.
- Horse, P. G. "Reflections on American Indian Identity." In C. L. Wijeyesinghe and B. W. Jackson III (eds.), *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: A Theoretical and Practical Anthology*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Jensen, R. "White Privilege Shapes the U.S." *Baltimore Sun*, July 19, 1998. <http://www.baltimoresun.com>. Accessed Feb. 12, 2004.
- Wijeyesinghe, C. L. "Racial Identity in Multiracial People: An Alternative Paradigm." In C. L. Wijeyesinghe and B. W. Jackson III (eds.), *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: A Theoretical and Practical Anthology*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

DR. PERRY G. HORSE (KIOWA) serves as consultant to tribal colleges and on Native American higher education issues.

Copyright of *New Directions for Student Services* is the property of Jossey-Bass, A Registered Trademark of Wiley Periodicals, Inc., A Wiley Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.