

AMERICAN SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES

Part 2: Native American Cultural Values in Relation to Life Space (1)

By Shoji Mitarai

The term "Indian" (or Indio), which came from the most celebrated mistake in history, carries several different connotative meanings. For some people (including the Japanese), one basic referent of "Indian" comes to mean stone age man or inhabitants of India. Whereas many Dakotans and Nebraskans use "Indian" to denote Sioux, some Oregonians or Washingtonians in the Far West maintain that "whether settled or shifting, whatever their culture patterns, the Indians must be regarded as the first traders, trappers, hunters, and travelers in the Pacific Northwest" (p. 9, 10). However, the word "Indian" normally refers to the aboriginal peoples of the Americas (or Native Americans) in the field of cultural anthropology. In so far as the method used in this study is socio-cultural, this paper treats the latter and gives certain new insights into the way in which Native Americans perceived and cared for life space—a general overall view of the Native American's perception of himself in relation to nature will be provided.* Since Native Americans have been markedly heterogeneous (even within a single State of Oregon, there were 180,000 Native Americans grouped into about 125 different tribes. p. 8, 10),**

* This paper does not deal with a historical sequence of relationships between Native Americans and Whites or the U.S. troops (because it is assumed that the reader is likely to know the history of Indian-White contacts and Indian wars such as the Little Big Horn versus Custer in 1876), nor does it attempt to describe the location of various tribes and confederacies at their most significant historical time and place.

** When the writer conducted a survey in Central and Eastern Oregon in January, 1974 with anthropologists and researchers, the total population of Native Americans on four different reservations was about three thousand. The population of Warm Springs alone was estimated at about one thousand and six hundred (5).

four tribes representing different regions of North America will be investigated in this paper. This investigation will predispose the general reader and students of American cultural studies to get a clear picture of how the Native American's life space helped determine his perception and attitude towards it.

In our effort to have a better understanding of Native Americans and their cultural values, it is vitally important as well as necessary to look into their origins first. As scientists and cultural anthropologists generally conclude, the first native peoples of the Americas did not originate in America. There have been many hypotheses with regard to the origin of the American Indian; two of the worst speculations being the twelve tribes of Israel and the continent called Atlantis. It should be pointed out here that no scientist has collected enough data to establish this point conclusively. But many researchers in the field of cultural anthropology are now in agreement that the first Americans migrated into the New World via the land bridges across the Bering Strait over a period of years.* For instance, Page is of the opinion that early immigrants traveled all the way from North East Asia to the New World about ten thousand years ago. He spells out that "the ice retreated inundating the Bering Strait Land Bridge most recently around the thousand years ago and we know that America was populated then" (p. 20, 7).** It should be emphasized that the first Americans did not have a close-knit social organization, nor did they get settled within a short time. The immigration was a prolonged process and successive waves of immigrants began to scatter across the continent. By the end of the 15th century, they settled down in many parts of the Americas. When Christopher Colum-

* There are some other theories reported by trained scientists and anthropologists. For example, Muller-Beck's research indicates that early immigrants walked across on two land bridges and entered the New World. The first land bridge is said to have existed between about 50,000 and 40,000 B.C., and the second one between about 26,000 and 8,000 B.C. (pp. 1203-1204, 6).

** Adams supports Page's view and wrote that "The first newcomers were Asian nomads who crossed the Bering Sea 'Land Bridge' into North America. Unlike subsequent arrivals, they met no opposition" (p. 6, 1).

bus discovered the Western Hemisphere and he assumed that he had reached the shores of Asia (the Indies of Asia), the total aboriginal population of North America was about one million and a half. But scholars like Dobyns still proclaim that the population of North America in the 15th century is estimated at about ten million (p. 27, 9).

It is also necessary to add that when the Pilgrims came to the American shore, there were several thousand tribes and subtribes using thousands of languages and dialects. The number of languages listed by linguists is about two hundred and twenty (Others classify their forms of speech into fifty eight language families).

Although the life of Native Americans is just as incomprehensive as are the complexities of civilization, there is a tendency among people today to look at crystalized different social patterns for Indian-non-Indian relationships or physical characteristics of Native Americans.* But to better recognize and appreciate cultural values shared by Native Americans, it is essential to take a closer look at their inner belief systems and religion. Ever since Spanish, French, Dutch, and English came into relationship with Native Americans, some reference has been made repeatedly that Native Americans have no religious ideals and no code of ethics, mainly for the reason that from the Western point of view they do not recognize the supreme God, and the assertion has historically been made that the most distinctive feature of the Native American religion is either magic and something supernatural or sun worship. But the fact remains that no people hold a more elaborate religious system than Native Americans and none are more pious in the performance of the duties related to their religion. Their religious system is sometimes so complex that it requires much time and study to comprehend a part of its meaning. Driver, for example, expatiates on it:

In comparison with Whites in the United States today, the Indians were at least ten times as religious. Every thought and act was hedged or blastered by religion or magic, which ranged all the way

* As for the history of Indian-non-Indian contacts, see the first Chapter of Hagan's book (3).

from an amorphous feeling of reverence to the performance of elaborate rituals where every word and gesture was prescribed in advance... 'Religion' is technically regarded by anthropologists as the relation of man to supernatural personalities with anthropomorphic attributes (p. 396, 2).

A sharp distinction between natural and supernatural was not drawn by Native Americans; rather they blended the two into one harmonious whole.

By and large the Native American's religion was reinforced by group participation and dealt with what was most significant for his or her survival. The forces of nature, the weather, the sun, the moon, trees, plants, animals and such activities as hunting, fishing, gathering and farming were primary concerns in the Native American religion. A great variety of foods, both wild and domesticated, were hedged by the Native American religion. It was thought that not only spirits but also magical forces would determine one's success in one's food-gathering venture whether it was hunting, fishing, gathering, farming* or stockbreeding. Native Americans were culturally conditioned to believe that they ought to treat these spirits or forces in the proper manner and at the proper time if they were to be successful providers.

It appears that Native Americans, who were trained to value thriftiness or frugality, did not waste anything. For instance, they killed just as many animals as their groups or people needed and took as many wild plants as could be used from the earth. The world, to them, was not made up of inanimate materials to be used and of animals to be butchered, eaten, and wasted. It was alive and everything in it had a certain power to help or harm them.

Hunting and Fishing—Native Americans visualized their world as inhabited by spirit counterparts of real animals. They believed that man

* According to Hall, the Taos still believe that since Mother Earth is pregnant in the spring time, they do not drive their wagons to town to protect the surface of the earth (for religious reasons). Further, they take all the shoes off their horses, and refuse to wear hardsoled shoes themselves (p. 79, 4).

and animals (and natural events) were moved by the same impulses, ruled by the same feelings, and subject to the same limitations. It can be said that both human beings and animals of the lowest, as well as highest class in the chain of creation were spiritually equated by them as they are physically equated by today's biologists (p. 98, 2). It was also believed by Native Americans that every animal was endowed with reasoning power and faculty. Every animal had a soul that could survive after death, and each animal could report on how it had been killed, butchered, and consumed, and on the disposal of the inedible parts. Whenever a person was ready to go hunting, he was instructed to follow specific procedures. Should he fail to do so, he gave grave offense to the spirit of the slain animal, which could inform other animal souls of its improper or indecent treatment. Souls of living game, as well as of dead ones could hear of such cases and refused to allow their bodies to be slain by such an indecent hunter, who after all lost an opportunity to get any more game. In some regions, if a hunter killed such a major animal as a whale, he had to go into mourning the same as he would for a dead relative. Among some of the tribes in the Northwest, when the whale was killed and beached, the following ritual was performed: "(After the whale was killed), the body was decorated with eagle feathers and ochre clay. The Chief received the first cut of choice meat and he then distributed the rest of the carcass to the accompaniment of songs and speeches to the village, rank by rank" (p. 147, 7). The whale hunt also involved both the Chief and his wife. To cite an example, while the Chief was at sea, his wife had to lie immobile on her bed, for a special kinship was believed to exist between whales and the Chief's wife.

The animal spirits of North America took a dual form; human and animal. When humankind arrived and the animal retired to the forest and waters, they maintained the ability to put on human guise whenever they chose.* Even in their homes they always did so. Hidden away

* For example, the most powerful of all the animal spirits was believed to be the Coyote among many of the Plateau Indians and the Plain tribes. Some tribes settled down in the Pacific Northwest believed that the Coyote could take human form just as a Chief wearing turtle shells near the Columbia River (p. 14, 7).

where no mortal could discover them, they set up villages with clans in the same way the local Indian tribe did. And only favored people could have an opportunity to visit them and be given some of their wisdom (p. 41, 8).

It was commonly believed by Native Americans that the animal never really died, yet this did not indicate that the hunter could waste and consume them as he chose. Before they abdicated their world rule, the animals had met together to make conditions about giving their bodies for food. It was for this reason that the hunter was required to practice a form of communication that was part religious and part practical. On the religious side, it was a necessary prerequisite for the hunter to take good care of the bones and other remains, and he also had to keep them away from marauding dogs or menstruating women. When it comes down to the practical side, the hunter killed no more than he needed and did it without undue pain to his quarry or game. A myth found among the Cherokee Indians gives us one example of what would happen if the hunter did not follow the proper hunting procedures. As the story goes, at first the animals were on friendly terms with the human race. However, as the humans increased rapidly and started to deploy new weapons, they became a serious menace to the safety of the animals. Therefore, the animals consulted as to what should be done. Finally, the deer (the most persecuted animal), came up with the idea of giving rheumatism to the humankind. Then other animals decided to choose diseases that they would impose on the humans. Thereafter, the plants felt pity for the humans and each variety of herbs and grasses as well established a mutual agreement in providing a remedy for some particular disease (p. 41, 8).

Hunting was regarded as the dominant subsistence activity in seven out of seventeen culture regions. Hunting areas covered about one half of the total land area of the continent. While a hunter oftentimes had to hunt alone, he almost always shared his kill or game with other members of the community that were in need. However, a person who was ill (in the village) had to refrain from eating fresh meat, for anyone

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who was associated with illness was considered to be detrimental or dangerous to hunting luck. — To be continued —

Notes

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