

AMERICAN SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES

Part 3: Native American Cultural Values in Relation to Life Space (2)

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Dependence on various kinds of fish exerted a marked influence on the way of life of Native Americans (particularly, tribes on the Northwest Coast and the Plateau). The social aspects of fishing were similar to those of hunting in that one usually shared one's catch with others in need and in turn obtained a share of another's fish. As previously mentioned,* the owner was unable to hold his kill, game, or catch for sale—a notion completely repugnant to Native Americans who held a belief that food was something to be eaten by those who needed it, not something by which to become wealthy or rich. While ritual treatment of the first fish was like a prayer for an abundance in the future among the Coastal and Plateau Indians, among other tribes, fishing was in general hedged with less ceremonialism than hunting since it did not constitute the major item in the diet of the continent as a whole.** And cultural anthropologists, generally speaking, come to an agreement that fish were farther removed from man biologically than mammals and resembled man much less in physical appearance and behavior. Whales were treated with great consideration and respect. A drink of fresh water was given to them before they were cut up according to rule. The parts not used had to be well taken care of as stipulated in a ritual long ago. Fish

* For further information, see "American Socio-Cultural Studies" Part 2 in Culture & Language Vol. 17, No. 1, September 1983, Sapporo University (Japan).

** Tribes on the Northwest and the Plateau always gave ceremonial treatment to the first fish (salmon) they caught, and they returned its bones to the river with the prayer lest other salmon be angered by disrespectful treatment and fail to appear for fishermen (p. 77. 3).

bones or seal bladders were thrown into the sea from which they were taken.*

Gathering and Farming—The gathering of wild plant foods at different seasons and in different places was principally the task of women. A woman gatherer was customarily instructed to share her plant produce with the other women in the same camp or village. Ceremonial treatment for the first plant of the season was normal practice among the more sedentary tribes of the Northwest Coast, Plateau, California, Southwest, Meso-America, Praries, and East. Cressman, for example, gives the following account of the first fruit (plant) ceremony conducted by the Klamath tribe in Oregon:

In general the first roots (plants)...if eaten, were not eaten as ordinary game or food. There were special methods of preparing them with appropriate ritualistic words said, sometimes by a shaman, at other times by a specially chosen person, and they were consumed with ceremony and the remains disposed of respectfully. These first-fruit (plant) ceremonies were widespread and varied, of course, according to the subsistence patterns of the people. They were religious in nature and their purpose was to insure a generous supply of foods of various kinds (p. 77, 3).

Tribes which led a more nomadic way of life were unable to find time for such cultural elaboration. Some people are prone to assume that those who developed elaborate public subsistence ceremonies did so because their anxiety over food was far greater than those who dealthed them. But it is misleading to assume so because "anxiety over food was universal in nature in North America. The areas where population was thinner because starvation was more frequent, were the very ones which lacked such major ceremonies" (p. 101, 4).

As has been pointed out, the division of labor in food gathering generally made men the hunters or fishermen and women the plant gatherers. However, if one looks into the farming (which was a highly socialized

* The Nootkas, for example, frequently hunted whales for food during the months of May and June in home waters (p. 13, 15).

activities with a number of rules and regulations among Native Americans), one can find a distinct cleavage on sexual division of labor between east and west. While in the southwest and Meso-America, most of the activities associated with farming were normally the duty of men, on the Prairie and in the East, farming was mainly the work of women.

Tribes settled in the agricultural regions developed rituals which were linked more with maize than with all other cultivated plants combined. They formalized such rituals as Green Corn rites, planting rites, and harvesting rites. Rain making ceremonies, which must have existed in some form when the earliest Native Americans came to the New World, were frequent throughout areas in which agricultural products were heavily relied on, and in which tribespeople at some time in their lives were driven to extremes to survive because of droughts. For Native Americans who practiced agriculture, environment was a partial determinant of religion and ceremony.

The Pueblos—The Pueblos (meaning the stone or adobe house in English, and town or persons in Spanish) settled down in semi-desert areas in the Southwest. Inasmuch as cultural anthropologists like Benedict once mentioned something to the effect that “Pueblo culture...has homogenous history behind it...” (p. 59, 2), many people are led to believe that only the Hopi and the Zuni are (and have been) classified as the Pueblo tribes. However, as a matter of fact, they consist of a number of other different tribes. Among them are the Acoma, the Kares, the Laguna, the Tano, the Taos, the Tewa, the Tiwa, the Pecos, the San Felipe, and other Rio Grande tribes.*

Over the centuries the Pueblo tribes had developed a culture based on hunting and gathering, to which agriculture was added in time. As the role of agriculture in the subsistence pattern increased, the Pueblos learned how to store food supplies since famines were considered a real threat

* Once there were seventy Pueblo tribes in the area bounded by the Pecos, Taos, and the Grand Canyon. As for Western Pueblos (the Hopis, Hopi-Tewas, Zunis, Acomas, and Lagunas, see the book “The American Indians” by Spicer (pp. 124-125, 13).

to the Pueblos.* Stored food furnished supplies for periods when agricultural products were not growing. Therefore, they did not have to stabilize the seasonal movements of bands in search of food. Since agricultural products, including maize, provided a large part of the year-round diet, the Pueblos were able to form larger social units and to develop highly complex communal lifestyles, ceremonies, and belief systems.

Many of the Pueblos lived in towns or villages high above the surrounding plains on the top of so-called mesas, and they managed to establish rancherias where springs or running water were available. Near the towns or villages were fertile gardens and fields in which men and women shared the labor (pp. 149-152, 10 & pp. 247-251, 9).

One is likely to speculate that as the Pueblos historically chose to live in areas where farming was extremely intensive, that they not only gained control over the earth but exploited nature to their advantage. But this was not the case. The pueblos knew that their way of life was dependent upon what nature provided in the region. Therefore, They were just as concerned about keeping in harmony with the spirits of nature as any other group.

The Pueblo Indians and other tribes originally inhabited a vast and uncrowded region with season after season following in an orderly manner, which directly created two culture-forming concepts. One was the concept of space; he could perceive boundaries or space without employing standardization of the segments which are used for measuring space and territoriality. The other was the concept of time; he could try to capture a sense of self and consider all things carefully. There was no need to rush or to make hasty decisions. Events could start when time was ripe and things were ready. It appears that to the Pueblos time was not something fixed or measurable, nor was it a quantity. Hall, who con-

* The Navajos (not Pueblo, but related to the Mescalero and Chiricahua Apaches) acquired agriculture from the Pueblos in the eighteenth century. They are the largest of all the remaining tribes in the United States today. Spicer reports that as of 1975, there were more than 160,000 Navajo-speaking people lived in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah (p. 128, 13).

ducted research on the Pueblo Culture, makes the following observation :

Even within the very borders of the United States there are people who handle time in a way which is almost incomprehensible to those who have not made a major effort to understand it. The Pueblo Indians, for example, ... have a sense of time which is at complete variance with the clock-bound habits of the ordinary American citizen. For the Pueblos events begin when the time is ripe and no sooner (p. 21, 6).

It must be pointed out that even changes, if made, were made slowly (not according to arbitrarily established units) and for some logical reason.* To these people who were reared in the Southwestern part of the United States, the sun was regarded as the actual source of life. They held the belief that the sun must constantly and carefully be watched and pleased. Their conception of time, often called "a fluid continuum", was always geared toward the rising and setting of the sun.

The Chinookans—One cannot leave off with tribes in the Northwest without mentioning the Chinookans. The Chinookans ruled the region from the upper Columbia to the Dallas before the time of Christ (p. 17, 1). They were originally gatherers who relied on what nature provided in the area for food. However, as time passed, they found that they could subsist almost wholly on fish because the rivers on the edges of the area especially in the Columbia, yielded fish (pink salmon, smelt, steelhead, and sturgeon) which could be dried and preserved. As fishing dominated all other food-gathering activities, it permitted them to have lengthy periods of leisure and to develop a certain seasonal immobility. The following statement by Cressman corroborates this :

(Fishing) permitted them to occupy permanent villages and make use of these sections of the river... Since under normal circumstances salmon (and other fish) could have been taken here for (at least) nine months of the year, Indians along this part of the Columbia were very favorably situated as far as food supplies

* Hall, also illustrates the difference between the Hopi time, and the Navajo time and government bureaucratic time, and Euro-American time in his recent book "*The Dance of Life*" (pp. 27-40, 7).

were concerned. The richness of the supply tended to reduce their use of other foods...Hunting was of little importance (pp. 53-54, 3).

This seasonal immobility and leisure greatly contributed to the development of arts and ceremonialism.

The Chinookan's set of belief centered around the immortality of fish, and a series of rituals and taboos, which would ensure the return of fish, especially salmon, were observed. In this connection, Winther comments:

...salmon was usually available to the upper as well as the lower Columbia River inhabitants, and unlike any other fish, pink salmon meat was for most Indians a principal food. For this reason the salmon was held in reverence. Rituals were observed regarding its use, taboos surrounded it, and its place in mythology was an important one (p. 10, 15).

It seems reasonable that the Chinookans should develop such a belief (the fish was immortal) if one considers the spectacular phenomenon of the annual salmon runs. The main question is whether the Chinookans (and other tribes in the Northwest) knew the life cycle of salmon and other fish. The answer to the question is likely. Benedict, for instance, points out that "...the tribes of the Northwest Coast knew the calendar of the fish runs as other peoples have known the habits of bears or the season for putting seed into the earth" (p. 174, 2).

The Iroquois—The Iroquois tribes—Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onodaga, and Seneca—lived in the hills and valleys of upper New York.* Long before any European explorers arrived, they occupied areas from the Hudson to Lake Erie and thus controlled important waterways. At the

* A sixth tribe, the Tuscarora fled from North Carolina, was added in the eighteenth century. It was not until the 16th century that the five tribes (known to be masters of the ambush and warfare) put to an end to their fighting with each other and formed the League of the Five Nations. It is a known fact that some of the political ideals promulgated by the League were incorporated into the American Constitution. It must be added here that when English colonists came into the East the Iroquois allied themselves with the English against the French. This fact had a significant bearing on the development of the thirteen colonies. (Otherwise the American colonies might have been under French rule.)

time of the coming of the white man, they cleared the land in the western part of New York state (and in some parts of Canada) for farming (p. 14, 12). In contrast with tribes on the Prairies, they were sedentary people and subsisted to a great extent on farm crops (squash, corn, and other crops known to Europe). Large game and fish were of secondary significance among the Iroquois-speaking tribes. Of a number of ceremonies of a social and religious character, the Green Corn ceremony was looked upon as the most important event. Driver puts it this way:

Outstanding in the Eastern Woodland are calendrical, first-fruits, and agricultural dances, especially those of the Green Corn ceremony (among the Iroquois). Ritual dances among the Iroquois serve to give thanks to the gods, animals, and plants for their generosity to mankind. Women represent corn, beans, and squash in group dances (p. 205, 4).

The Green Corn rite was considered more or less a New-Year ceremony to regenerate the entire world, and the plants, animals, and humankind who lived on it.

The Cheyenne—The Cheyenne, one of the best known Plain tribes, not only to most of the Americans but also to many Japanese, led a settled existence on the Great Plains in the United States. It is certainly true that they were not settlers of towns. The core of their lives was hunting and farming. Therefore, cultural anthropologists refer to the Cheyenne as semisedentary people (p. 18, 14).* What must not be overlooked is that they raised such sizable annual crops as maize, beans, squash and pumpkins and stayed close to the village, particularly during the planting and harvesting seasons. At other times of the year, they moved out in small bands to hunt buffalo, carrying their tepees with them on dog-and-

* The Plain Indians are made up of diversity of peoples. For example, the Arakira, the Arapaho, the Blackfoot, the Cree, the Omaha, and the Sioux which separated into the Crow, the Dakotas, and the Mondan are well known. Those who are interested in issues on the national political boundaries and the historical relationships between the Cheyenne and the federal government, see "The Cheyenne" in *the American Indians* edited by Yagayo Honma (9).

horse-drawn travois. A number of large animals such as antelope, deer, elk, and buffalo in particular, provided a large percentage of the Cheyenne's diet and thus were a vital part of their religion. The Sun Dance was the greatest ceremony for the Cheyenne (Most of the ritualistic dances were performed by women who had promised the Dance to the Sun) (p. 77, 11). The ceremony centered on fertility, harvest, rain, growth, and hunting luck. The main purpose of the ceremony was to renew communion with the earth, sun, and particularly with the winds. The Cheyenne (and other plain tribes) thought of themselves as but one segment of a vast creation, whose every part had life both in itself and in the nature of its ongoing relationship with God.

On the one hand we have derived not only a great amount of ceremonial content but also a great deal of things in the area of technology from Native Americans. On the other hand we have often failed to learn their more difficult lessons, particularly lessons about the mind and spirit. Some of these lessons, in fact, concern the very things we have borrowed from Native Americans such as Peyote and Tobacco. Tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*), for instance, had a sacramental meaning among Native Americans. While it holds true that there existed "the Tobacco tribe" who specialized in raising tobacco and trading it to neighbors (on the Great Lakes as far as the Iroquois territory in the State of New York and Canada),* a wide variety of tobaccos were chewed, snuffed, drunk or smoked in concoctions by many tribes before European contact. When one took up tobacco smoking, the smoke was exhaled east, west, north and south, above and below, and then the smoker blew smoke on himself. It was in this way that he sought rapport with the cosmos. After smoking habits were diffused in the form of cigarettes to the masses in many parts of the world, people turned it into a personal habit, and we have consumed an excessive amount of it to the point where it has taken many lives. Native Americans have historically suggested that the trouble is with ourselves. Tobacco kills us because we do not treat it with great respect

* Tobacco Societies organized by the Plain Indians are fairly known by many trained cultural anthropologists (p. 88, 11).

and reverence.

The Native American certainly holds a different relationship to the natural world when compared with European-Americans. In showing respect for plants, he must be much closer to nature than Europeans are, and many European-Americans can imagine themselves to have been more akin to or like him in their distant past, before they began to exploit natural environment. Some Americans, who are under the influence of Aristotelian bipolar logic, are likely to believe that the Native American's characteristic "participation mystique (his feeling of unity with the world)", has blinded him to the clear distinction between himself and the plant. Others are liable to postulate that the supposed error has nothing to do with a lack of logic but in an overzealous and premature application of it, which seeks to link from the realms of psychosomatics "the attitude of respect" and biogeochemistry "plants and eternal death" in a single system of causal relation (p. 19, 5).

By the way of summary, it must be mentioned that some maintain that a large number of Native Americans have not inherited tendencies whatsoever toward high principles of morality and rationalistic value systems because they have failed to adopt wholly the Euro-American cultural values. They argue that morality and rationalistic value systems among Native Americans must come from education and contact with the better elements of the Euro-Americans. However, a significant point to be kept in mind is that Native Americans lived for many centuries on this earth as the first inhabitants of the United States (not as painted savages), barely leaving a trace of their existence, yet within a very short time, Euro-Americans, with their belief that the earth was given to them to exploit as they pleased, completely modified the appearance of this natural environment. Those who look upon Native Americans as remnants of days long gone tend to infer that Native Americans did not progress as far as material wealth and settled ways of industry are concerned, for they seemed to lack the Euro-American knowledge to do so. However, it is erroneous to make such an inference because if there had been room for them in such a scheme, they might have made an effort to

absorb Euro-American knowledge, and even accepted work as a means to earthly accumulation. Even though some tribes such as the Cherokees in the South made such an effort, it did not work at all. There was tremendous resentment at being thrown out of their territory and hunting grounds. Their resentment was primarily directed toward the land hunger of new settlers and the profit hunger of land speculators. At any rate, Native Americans were surviving and had found a life that they felt comfortable in and they knew their own places in nature. Native Americans might not have been thinking in terms of shortages or pollution when taking part in their religious treatment of their life space, but for useful objectives the effects of their beliefs and values prevented them from degrading it. Although most of the Native Americans today live in such squalor that it may be hard to view them as the heirs of the cultural splendors of the past (not as the romantic red men), their rituals, arts, symbolism, beliefs, and cultural values will continue to live on.

Notes

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