

TRADITIONAL SOCIAL STRUCTURES

EARLY SETTLERS spoke of the head chiefs as “kings,” and they were not too far wrong. The chiefs had strong authority and were greatly respected. Some, like the true king of the Natchez, were carried on litters and wore special insignia, such as feather cloaks. Their wives might be similarly honored. They were not hereditary, however. A man attained high rank through demonstrating his superior fitness for it. At the same time that the earliest settlers called these chiefs “kings,” they were struck by the fundamental democracy among the tribes. These were kings by the will of the people, not by the grace of God.

Reports of this democracy were carried to Europe, especially by the French. There, the idea of it was further elaborated. The influence of the first observations on the Indians can be traced through the French philosophers to the English, and with it went the concept of “government by consent of the governed.” This idea was first put into specific words by the British philosopher Locke. Thomas Jefferson, in turn, borrowed Locke’s phrasing and used it, slightly changed, in the Declaration of Independence. The evidence is strong that the development of democracy in both Europe and America was affected by sixteenth and seventeenth century contacts with the American Indians.

MOST TRIBES had clans, some of which counted descent through the mother, some through the mother, some through the father. Many were divided into halves or moieties; some grouped their clans into several different larger groups instead of only two. The common thing was to regard all members of a clan, even though they came from different villages and were total strangers to each other, as relatives, who helped each other and, as relatives, could not marry. Such clans are called “exogamous” meaning “outward marring.” Some were “endogamous” that is, although all fellow-clansmen felt bound to one another, they also married only within the clan.

Chieftainships were well defined. Among some tribes, chiefs were appointed for life, among some they were partly hereditary. Many tribes, especially in the northeastern group, had both war and peace chiefs, the peace chiefs being the real governors, the war chiefs leaders of war parties.

IN THE SOUTHWEST the men farmed, hunted, wove, embroidered, and made jewelry. The women did a good deal of the building and all the plastering; cooking, pottery making and basketry. The men ran the government and controlled the ceremonies, but the women had an important place in the religion, and had a lot more to say about civil matters than appeared on the surface. A man has to live with his wife, and while it is he who has the say in government, it can become uncomfortable for him at home if he says the wrong thing.

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Every tribe had its own custom for tracing descent. The western Pueblos traced it through the women, using a very strong clan system. Everything went by the clans, or by certain lineages within the clans. The fields were clan property, subdivided into family property belonging to the female head of the house. Rituals, ceremonial properties such as masks, priesthoods, the chieftainships of the villages, went by clans.

In the Hopi tradition, a given chieftainship belongs to the main lineage of a particular clan. The head of that clan is the "clan mother." The elder lady has no formal authority, but when she speaks, everyone listens. Someone descended from her will inherit that particular chieftainship, and with it the ceremonial properties that belong to it. That man will marry a woman of another clan, to which his children will belong. One of his nephews or great-nephews, his sister's or his niece's child, will succeed him.

The father is a guest in his wife's mother's house. He tends to his sons' education, plays with them, helps them along, but they are not members of his clan. It is the chief member of their clan, their mother's brother, who will discipline them, while their father will discipline his nephew. As a result, among the Hopis a lot of Freudian theory is useless; the situations Freud described just don't exist.

The majority of Indian tribes permitted two or more wives; most Indians took only one. The peoples of the Pueblos are monogamous, much like that of modern Americans; a man might marry only one woman at a time, but divorce and remarriage were not too difficult.

AMONG THE PLAINS TRIBES, organization was loose and democratic. At special times, as during a hunt, the police imposed rigid discipline; at other times, public opinion was the main force. Chiefs were respected, they were advisers, but they did not give orders. If two men started a fight, chiefs might come between them carrying sacred pipes and urge them to stop, but no force was used. Among the Cheyennes, who had a complex system of law, murder was taken very gravely. It damaged the whole tribe. It profaned the Sacred Arrows, their holiest possession and the center of their sacred power. The murderer came before the council of chiefs, and might be exiled for as long as ten years.

Among the Crow, murder was a private matter between the killer's clan and victim's. The police came into the picture, not to make an arrest or to try to punish, but to try to persuade the killer and his people to make an adequate payment to the bereaved, so as to avoid the starting of a harmful feud.

The power of public opinion was great. The Blackfoot had a system of mockery that could make life intolerable for a man, and drive him out alone on a quest for death or war honors with which to redeem himself. In some tribes, it was a particular relative's duty to rebuke a man who had behaved badly. The rebuke was given publicly, and the shame felt was an intense punishment.

Behavior between relatives was exactly defined in most tribes. There were those with whom one was expected to joke and roughhouse (who might be the same ones whose duty included the

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rebuke), and those with whom one dealt always in terms of great respect. Some tribes maintained a beautiful relationship between brothers and sisters. Brothers felt great responsibility for sisters; sisters, in turn did their brothers many favors such as making especially fine moccasins for them. When they grew up, an extreme form of the respect relationship was required, under which they could barely speak to each other. This did not mean coldness; it showed the lofty and strong nature of their feeling for each other. Mutual service and help continued through life, and the affections also continued very strongly.

In the Plains and other tribes “societies” were formed. Some tribes had both men’s and women’s societies, others only men’s. They might be purely religious, like the Crow Tobacco Society, which planted the sacred tobacco and held rituals connected with the plant for the good of the whole camp, or primarily military with religious elements, like the Dog Societies of the Mandans and a number of other northern tribes. These societies often performed the police functions described and were also pledged to extreme heroism in war.

As in most tribes, intangibles such as honors, membership in a society, and status, were far more valuable than usable possessions. Anyone who amounted to anything practiced open-handed generosity in a conspicuous manner. Chiefs often reduced themselves close to poverty helping the poor. What we think of as property was lightly held. But powerful songs, sacred bundles, the knowledge of how to conduct a particular rite, were valuable. Even when someone’s own father or mother possessed the knowledge and the articles that went with it, they had to be paid horses, robes, and other goods before they would turn them over.

IN THE NORTHWEST, B.C., AND ALASKA, social organization and religion were closely interwoven. Each village was an independent unit, and might make war upon other villages of the same speech and customs or might be loosely allied with some of them. Villages were grouped around a core of relatives. In the north, where there were clans, descent was traced through the mother. In the south, many groups counted descent as the dominant society does, through both father and mother, with emphasis on the father’s line. Inheritance, which was of vital importance, went the same way. Where the clan system existed, the village was organized around a clan. Some had moieties, usually Eagle and Raven or Raven and Wolf. Common clan names were Eagle, Raven, Wolf, and Blackfish (killer whale and black whale).

In the north the important thing was that, within the group, however organized, there were lines of descent, or lineages, of a straight line to a supernatural animal such as Raven, Eagle, or Bear, or to a human who had had a special experience with a supernatural being and from it received special powers and rights.

The individual’s ancestry, and certain other experiences including unusual achievements, gave him the right to certain insignia, or “crests,” such as are carved on the totem or longhouse poles. From the accumulation of these things, and also by certain methods of purchase (as in other tribes), came such possessions as the right to dance certain dances, sing certain songs, perform certain rituals, the right to hunt whales, and the “ownership” of salmon-catching areas. In the south, the hereditary principle weakened, and purchase became important.

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Out of the variety of crests, rights, and prerogatives developed a detailed system of grading; from chiefs; who had a great deal, down through the nobility to the common people, the poorest of whom had no honors or special rights at all. Below them were the slaves.

What the individual, commoner, noble or chief owned was not purely his own. It was also property of the group as a whole, giving them all status as compared with other groups; working to their benefit. Thus when a chief was called upon to give a great feast to the chiefs and nobles of another group, everybody gladly pitched in to help and contribute, and in the long run, the chief paid everyone back. In this manner, even common persons had a means of accumulating wealth or position through their own efforts.

WHEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES are overwhelmed by a totally alien culture, they have three choices. One is nativism; to reject the dominant culture altogether and make a special effort to preserve all old ways in purity. This seldom, if ever, works. For Native Americans, the colonists pressed too remorselessly; also they offered too much that was useful and attractive.

The second choice is complete acceptance of the new culture; entirely abandoning the old one. This, also, seldom works. There are exceptions, but as a rule the native who has cut himself off from all of his own tradition is an incomplete and uneasy person. There is too much learned in infancy, the warmth of certain types of family relationships, the satisfaction of certain ways, a mode of thinking of one's self, a set of values, that nothing can satisfactorily replace. Given a proud tradition, a sense of the goodness of belonging to a certain race and having the history a given tribe has, a profound desire to continue to be members of that tribe and to keep it in being, is in almost every Indian person. Accepting this, it can be easily understood how tribes remain Indian after four hundred years (plus) of contact with the white man, and after having been moved, sometimes hundreds of miles from their original homes.

The third choice, and the most hopeful one, is making a new adaptation; taking what is good of the dominant culture and blending it with the tribal culture. In great degree, this is what most Indians have been doing. It is hard, not only because the white man habitually pushes the physical and sovereign boundaries of tribes, but also because the dominant society holds the conviction that no people can become progressive unless they become exactly like them.

A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR underlying every tribal society is the reliance on the group, the family, the clan. Those structures were well understood by all members of the tribe without many formal procedures.

A well known characteristic of Indian people that contributes to tribal and general Indian cohesiveness is the ability to laugh; playfully making fun of themselves, others and situations. People very familiar with tribes will tell about it's people's extraordinary sense of humor and their love of laughter.

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Indian family ties are deep and strong, and in general, Indian people are passionately fond of children and delightful with them. Indian children are well brought up, but in most tribes, they are never struck. Some believed the younger the child, the closer to the Creator that child was.

The influence and repression of the dominant culture has had an affect on the social structures of tribes, but in general, the family feeling still reaches wide; to grandparents, brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts, children, nieces and nephews. It is unthinkable to abandon them or refuse them help. From this arises one of the serious issues not familiar to the dominant culture. The Indian who is doing well financially, either on the reservation or off, has in his/her family an elder, a child, perhaps a sick or hungry relative (usually more than one), whom they will support or take in to care for. The load can be so heavy that you could say they share the other's poverty, rather than that the family members share in the comparative wealth. Most often this situation is known and accepted in the Indian community, although not talked about, especially to outsiders. Seeing the condition of the working Indian who should have the trappings of someone "doing well financially" and doesn't, comes the assumptions and stereotypes are relegated to the past.

IN THE WINTER of 1831, the French traveler, Count Alexis de Tocqueville, while watching the forced removal of a band of Choctaws, was moved to remark, "No cry, no sob...all were silent. Their calamities were of ancient date, and they knew them to be irremediable." The spectacle moved Tocqueville, but he shrewdly perceived its deeper meaning. The Indian tribes of North America, he wrote, "have been ruined by a competition which they did not have the means of sustaining. They were isolated in their own country, and their race constituted only a little colony of troublesome strangers in the midst of a numerous and dominant people."

Yet that "little colony" had one great strength to cling to: the dynamic of Indian life which, against all defeats and humiliations, still tries to gather up the pieces and maintain a moral order, a harmony between man and his universe. For a living society is always an extension of its past. And the clash of cultures between red man and white was essentially a continent-wide effort by tribal groups to hold fast to the values and life ways which had evolved in the course of centuries of New World adaptation.