Indian Culture Essay, Research Paper

Our Hearts Fell to the Ground

Indian culture is viewed, as a timeless past because the most recent past caused by the white man was so destructive and horrific. If the immediate past were held in as much regard as the timeless past people would not be so inclined to hold such pride for our wonderful nation.

The Indians are viewed in a very generic way. All Indians are viewed the same. Depicted with painted faces, feathers, bows and arrows, and red skin. . All Indians are regarded as hunters and gatherers. Some see the Indians as peaceful people and others see them as war-like. In both cases they are wild, living among the forests in the so-called Edenic paradise.

In some way all of these generalizations are correct. The reality is that only certain tribes acted in certain ways at certain times. Most if not all of the Indian tribes were very civilized people. They were very spiritual and had great pride and respect for each other.

Like the Europeans there was a certain way of fighting in a battle. It was set up like a stage. An example is when the Sioux and the Hidasta were going to go to battle. Warriors fought for prestige or revenge and waged ritualized battles in which counting coup carried more honor than inflicting casualties (71). The Sioux and the Hidastas were fighting over a contest of war medicines to see whose was stronger. Much time was spent putting on the war paint and moving teepees towards the battle sight so that the women and children could watch. Each one tries to show the power over the other, while no fighting has yet occurred. The women and the young men put on chants and yell out the calls of war. Once everything is in place then the fighting can begin. The fight is not about death but two men die. The Hidastas won the battle but could not rejoice for the lost two lives of their tribe. Thus they were in mourning and could not count how strong they had actually been. It was a lost battle by both in this respect (74-76).

The plains Indians based their life on the hunting of the buffalo. Many of them farmed as well. The Pawnee Indians drew charts of stars on elk skins and then arranged their villages so that their lodges would then be in the same formations. They thought of this as an intermediary between the heavens and the earth (56). The Quakers in 1875 sought out the Pawnees and tried to civilize them. They tried to make them give up hunting and to live solely on farming. Ignoring the fact that the Pawnees had been farmers for hundreds of years- they grew ten varieties of corn, eight types of beans, and seven kinds of squash and Pumpkins (56). They were missing the fact that the Pawnees used the meat to give to the gods. The Quakers saw this as their chance to civilize the Pawnees and to save them from there savage ways of life (57).

The early settlers specifically the colonist thought that the Indians were savages that needed taming. They did not consider them to be real people with real societies. If it was not like them then it was not right. The scariest part of the whole situation is that the colonists came to the Americas to make a new start -to begin a new life. Unfortunately, they lost sight of whose lives they were then reforming into their own.

The government spent a lot of time and funds to reform the Indians. They could not leave their way of life alone because it conflicted with the Europeans way of life. They were used to having land plotted and owned by different men. The Indians never believed in owning the land. They only believed in using it. Tribes would move about as the weather and the food supply required them to.

Government projects were set up to gather tribes together and keep them in one area so that they could be Americanized . They felt that if the Indians were tamed and acclimated to their way of living that everything would be fine. The new citizens could never accept the Indians for who they were. Nor did they ever try.

Soon the Indians became an enemy to the white man. Disease spread rampantly and even when there were vaccinations very little effort was put in to helping the Indians out. Mortality rates of between 50 and 90 percent were common whenever new epidemics struck (40).

Four Bears was a very famous Indian, known throughout Indian and white cultures. He was known for his strength, fearlessness in battle and generosity to the people. He was a power in the Indian culture. He was on good ground with the white man but when the Epidemic hit his tribe of the Mandans and almost the whole tribe was washed out. He was no longer a friend of the white man anymore. In 1831, the Smallpox epidemic began by 1937 there was a vaccination but it did not reach the Mandans. On July 30, 1837 Four Bears made a speech to the white man. He stated,

Ever since I can remember, I have loved the Whites, I have lived with them ever since I was a boy, and to the best of my knowledge, I have never wronged a white man I have always protected them form the insults of other . 4bears never saw a white man hungry, but what he gave him to eat, drink, and a buffaloe skin to sleep on, in time of need. I was always ready to die for them how have they repaid it! With ingratitude! I have never called a white man a dog but today, I do pronounce them to be a set of Black harted Dogs (68-9).

Four Bears died that same day. The Indians considered him to be murdered. From this point to many of the Indians and the White man things were never the same again. The Indian culture was torn apart. The government overrode treaty after Treaty. Documents that the American government had written themselves, they took back or changed without a further thought.

The white man knew that the adults were a lost cause so the tried to reform the children. They put them in boarding schools so that the contact with their homes on either the reservation or within the tribe would be stunted. The students were treated horribly not even considered citizens. Like the children of immigrants from Europe who were streaming into the country at the time, the first Americans would have to learn to conform like white Americans (16). The girls were trained to be maids and the boys learned vocational and manual labor skills. They stripped them of their home life of close community, hunting and gathering, knowledge of the land and respect for all people and things. Forced them into stiff uniforms, cut their hair and made them learn English. Some parents stopped teaching their children their native language because it was too painful for them to endure living in the white nation. One child recalls the day he got his hair cut. When my hair was cut short, it hurt my feelings to such an extent that the tears came to my eyes (175).

So much was stripped from the Indians in such a short period of time. All that they knew in life was either taken or changed without their consent and sometimes knowledge. If the white man today knew the horrific stories of the Indians perhaps there would be some change. After five hundred years of contact, Indians and Whites are still trying to work out their relations, and Indians continue to fight to hold on to the things they deem essential (206).

One of the newest events in Indian History is the fact the Casinos are coming about by the Indians and they are making tons of money off of this. In one respect it gives off the wrong idea about Indians on the other hand it is a modern way for the Indian to take back some of what was taken from them. In battle Indian warriors did not abandon traditional beliefs and rituals; if anything they reaffirmed and intensified them because the need for spiritual protection was greater than ever (72). To this day the Indians are still holding on and now perhaps even making a comeback.