

## **Perceptions of Native Americans**

### **General Introduction To The History**

#### ***The 'Other'***

##### **Mainstream America and Native Americans**

The term 'other' is used to define a group of people we separate from, define as different from us, usually in a negative way. The term 'other' has been used to label other 'races' and cultures compared to our Western, mainstream American culture. The 'other' has also been socially applied to women, when compared to men (men=normal, superior, women=different, inferior). Very appropriate is the term 'other' that categorizes Native American Peoples in an unbalanced relationship to Western Euro-Americans. Historically the Native People were treated as 'others.' Much of our misunderstanding and tone of interpretation only continues to separate Native Americans as the 'others.' It is because of 'us' that Native People are still the 'others.' Knowing the general background and progression of our relationship with Native American Peoples is the first step to understanding where we stand, how we arrived here, and where we now go from here as interpreters of this subject.

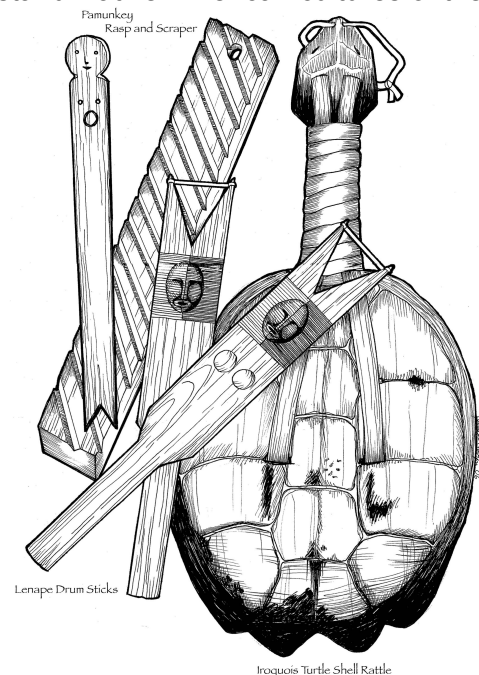
#### ***Creating The 'Other'***

##### **History, Propaganda and Native Americans**

Some of the first reports of the Native Peoples who inhabited Eastern North America were indeed very positive, in a sense. The inhabitants were pictured as quite healthy and hardy folks (when compared to European Peoples). It was, as claimed by these newcomers, the land that was so plentiful that it supported a well-built race of people. Even the word savage during these times actually meant "people of nature," not barbaric (blood-thirsty); it described a people considered to be just unsophisticated, in a non-violent sense (a). The indigenous people were described as welcoming, and their land a utopia of sorts. All these wonderful descriptions of the people and these lands reached Europe. If the Native People could live so heavenly in this place, rarely with sickness or disability (so they were told), than why couldn't they? Europeans packed their bags and made the trip overseas to find a better life. **Painting the Native People as a healthy stock (in the animal sense) due to their pristine environment, who posed no real threat served to attract Europeans to this land.** Quickly, descriptions of the Native Peoples

changed. More and more, they were painted as barbaric devil worshipers. They were considered a stain on this beautiful continent, and must be eliminated or at least pushed back, as God would approve of such actions. After all, land (by Christian worldview) was meant to be tamed, plowed, fenced in, and cared for by man. The Native Peoples did not ward over their lands in the same sense, therefore they did not own it and it was free for the taking. Europeans felt these lands were being wasted by an "ignorant race (b)." Indian men were painted as animals who could not control their lust; they were obvious threats to the chastity of their white daughters (c). Indian women were described as slaves to their men, their wretched lives so horrible that destroying their society would only free these poor souls. Nothing about these statements of Indian men and women were true. **Thus, Native American People were transformed into cruel and barbaric animals, with no legitimate claim to this land, so that Euro-Americans did not feel it a crime or sin to settle lands taken by force.**

It is this propaganda that infected many 'legitimate' historical observations of Native American life. It is unfortunate too because too many people today assume any opinion voiced by the observer was 'truth.' It takes more than tainted historical documentation by outsiders to understand Native American cultures of the past.



### **Cultural Truth: History Is What We Make It**

Funny to think we celebrate Columbus as a hero of sorts, for 'discovering' the Americas. History tells us of his extraordinary belief that he could sail around world. History tells us of his great perseverance in convincing others of his theory when so many ridiculed him and his ideas. We dedicate a day each year to celebrate a man we feel to be the embodiment of a great explorer. Most do know, to a point, of some crimes against the Native populations, such as war and pillaging of gold. However, most will remain ignorant of his hideous crimes against humanity like slavery, torture, and outright murder. Under his direction, his men released vicious dogs onto Native settlements, and allowed the rape of indigenous women. Even the Spanish Fathers who accompanied the expeditions (known for their own brand of torture and their 'killing the man to save his soul' attitude), thought Columbus and his men too barbaric in their acts against even a 'godless race.' We dedicate a day every year to this man and his expedition. History is not 'true' as much as it is subject to interpretation and propaganda. As one high school teacher stated, "Why do you think you are made to learn history? Its not so we don't repeat our mistakes. You learn American 'history' to make you a good American. It's to give you a sense of pride in your nation, not to tell you the truth." Propaganda history remains alive and well, even in our children's textbooks.

### **Studying The 'Other'** **Early Anthropology and Native Americans**

*"The work of early anthropologists among Native American peoples was crucial in codifying the idea of the Indian as Other (1)."*

Anthropology owes its start to Native Americans. Whether Native Americans owe anything to anthropology is debatable at best. The American Anthropologist was assigned the task of recording the Native American Peoples before they were "lost to history" (a goal currently underway by the United States). Native American cultures provided the subject while the American government provided the motivation. Indeed, Anthropologists recorded much material culture, folklore, and religious practices of several Native communities and 'tribes.' What was reported much less was the human aspect, a "very little sense of the

people as people..." "Their goal was not primarily to understand contemporary Native cultures, but to record them before they were lost (2)." It was this initial tone that set the basis for our continual views of Native American Peoples as the 'Other.'

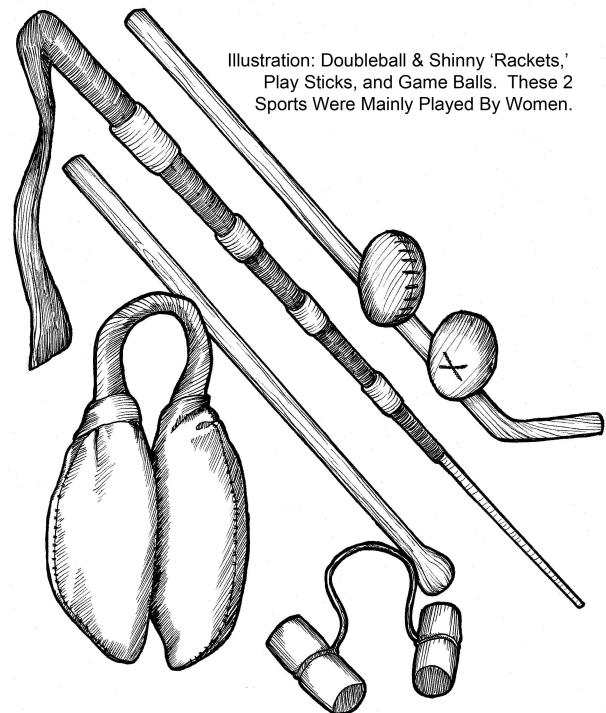


Illustration: Doubleball & Shinny 'Rackets,' Play Sticks, and Game Balls. These 2 Sports Were Mainly Played By Women.

**Cultural Truth: The Role of Indian Schools**  
Wars and expeditions were carried out by the early American government to 'rid' this land of its indigenous populations. When outright genocide was no longer a popular solution to the 'Indian problem' by mainstream Americans and religious groups, reservations and programs were established to corral and control Native populations. One such program, offering education to Indian youth, was sold to the Native Peoples as a way for their children to gain the knowledge they needed, such as reading and writing, to survive in the white world. Indeed, education could be a positive force, and many Native leaders and parents agreed to send their children to schools so that they might be able to have better lives and understand the white world. However, while education was the selling point, assimilation by forcing children to 'give up' or 'forget' their cultural values and customs was not addressed. Indian boarding schools were designed not to educate as much as to assimilate. Children were sent to schools far away from their reservations. Boys and girls were stripped of their 'uncivilized' garments and belongings. They were given new names (and identities) by strangers, who by Native standards, had no right to impose

such personal rituals. They were purposely placed in groups of mixed tribal backgrounds so they could not communicate until they had learned English. Those who uttered words in their indigenous tongue were subject to corporal punishment. They endured humiliating hair cuts. Long hair, especially on boys in the white world, was considered heathen. For Native Americans, short hair symbolized (depending on the child's tribe) everything from mourning a death to being a captive. Worse of all, short hair brought home the fact that they would not feel the affections of their parents on a daily basis, who lovingly groomed their hair with pride. These children were no longer their parents' pride – these children were now the government's experiment. The goal was clear: to erase the 'Indian.'

### ***Labeling The 'Other'***

#### **Popular Culture and Native Americans**

Obviously, Native Americans were not erased from the American fabric, although many customs and languages have been lost - casualties of these campaigns. For decades, Native Americans and their mixed descendants hid their Native roots for many reasons; two major ones being subjected to racism and denied the rights to own property. In the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Native Americans became icons of wisdom and nature. Being a white person with some Native descent not only became accepted but trendy but contemporary Native communities on reservations continued to live in severe poverty with little opportunities. Those few 'opportunities' put into place by our government were double-sided at best. One such program relocated Indian families from reservations to urban areas where jobs were more plentiful. Of course, the families would lose much of their cultural identity by being split up and placed into the larger mainstream society; a goal that seemed to be reminiscent of methods implemented by Indian schools. And while real Native American customs were becoming lost, Hollywood and romance novels spent no time reinventing the 'Indian' in images that would most appeal to white audiences. Savage, noble, spiritual, romantic (or lack of feeling), and tragic, all became ideas associated with the American Indian. Native Americans were becoming more and more a mystical and fanciful subject. This is unfortunately how many have been introduced to Native Americans, which then makes it very hard to reintroduce real Native American history.

*"The fascination with a largely innovative notion of Indian spirituality...Indians were chic - mystical, wise, earth-loving, and tragic...the Indian "wannabe" phenomenon was gaining momentum (3)."*

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#### **Cultural Truth: Selling the Counterfeit Indian**

In the 90's, Native American culture and subjects gained in popularity. "New Age" healing and music claimed Native American practices and technology as their basis. Phony shamans (of both Native and non-Native ethnicities) were popping up everyday, claiming to practice authentic healing and sweat lodge ceremonies. They catered to white Americans that blindly believed these colorful frauds. Followers spent their money hoping for a spiritual awakening, the kind that *all* Native Americans must have experienced. And when the truth was revealed, that most Native Peoples did not have such romanticized and bogus views of 'their' religion and did not care for these imposters to make money selling their culture (or what little part of it was actual Native beliefs), the practitioners claimed to be more true to the 'Indian ways' than these others (even though so many of these charlatans were not even Native American). To this day, much of the general population is more attracted to the romanticized, Hollywood Native Americans rather than the actual Native American cultures, history, and the Native People themselves. Of course, Native Americans are OK when dressed in powwow regalia and dancing such as in a 'romanticized, spiritual setting.' Unfortunately, these supposed 'traditions' and 'practices' continue to influence mainstream American culture, making it hard for the museum interpreter to debunk. After all, their sham version of Native American culture was made to be attractive to sell. We just tell the truth.

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## **Redefining The 'Other'**

### **Museum Interpretation and Native Americans**

The museum guide who is assigned the task of interpreting Native American subjects, from historic Native lifeways to modern urban Indian art, has a very unique set of circumstances. The Native American experience is hard to interpret, even for many Native Americans themselves, let alone by non-Indian museum guides and interpreters. One major obstacle is interpreting Native American subjects to students. More mainstream American children than ever believe Indian People do not exist anymore, because obviously if they did, there would be people wearing buckskins and living in tepees. And for those children who do know that Native People are a part of our modern society, many still point out that a person dressed in regalia is the "real Indian." It is up to the interpreter to make clear the difference between history and present, Hollywood and reality, and Powwow regalia and modern daily materials of Native American Peoples.

With the knowledge of realistic Woodland Indian life of the past, we as interpreters must communicate the basic understanding of Native life - of the human experience. It's so much more than material culture, dates of wars, and names of Native chiefs made famous by white culture. We have to convey the experience of the everyday fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, and grandparents and grandchildren. Teach not only what happened but why it happened. Don't just highlight customs that are different, relate the human elements we all share in common. Describe the Native People in familiar ways that will not separate us even more. Work to bring 'us' and 'them' closer together. Only we can erase the label 'Other.'

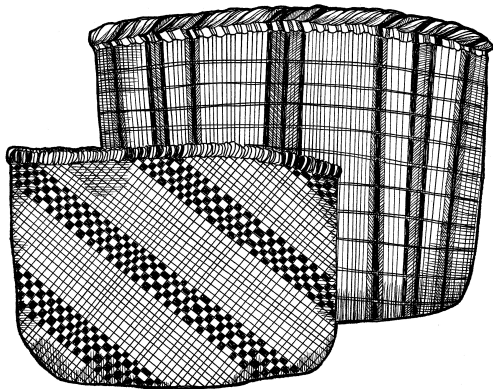
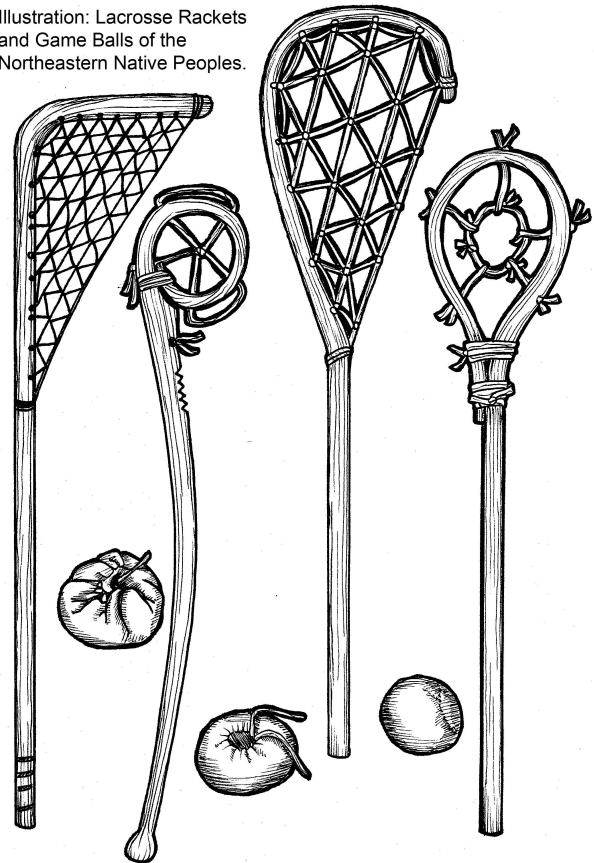


Illustration: Lacrosse Rackets and Game Balls of the Northeastern Native Peoples.



#### **Quotes**

"Selling the Indian, Commercializing & Appropriating American Indian Cultures" edited by Carter Jones Meyer and Diana Royer, The University of Arizona Press, 2001.

- (1) p.63
- (2) p.63
- (3) p.76

#### **Footnotes**

(a) The word savage usually drums up images and words like barbaric, violent, war-like, etc. Actually the word savage was originally used to describe people thought to be primitive, unsophisticated, and 'nature-like.' In fact, the Native People were often described in friendly terms as "children of nature." While many may not think these labels inherently oppressive, it was the classification that came with these labels that were quite destructive. By associating Native People with nature, the Europeans were actually saying that the Indian Peoples were less of a people (race), and more of a 'group' to be thought of as on the same level as animals and nature. Animals and nature was to be ruled over by man (Christian thought at the time), which means the Native People were to be ruled over also.

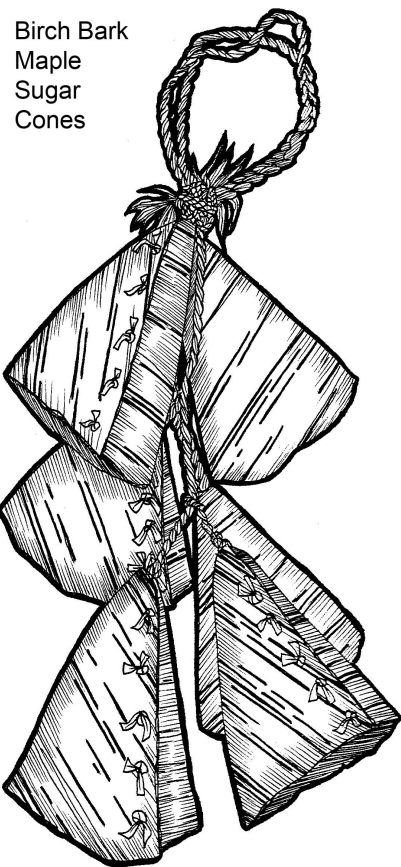
(b) It was common knowledge among Christian folks of the time that (as they interpreted) 'God wanted man to

rule over the animals and nature, as well as plow the soil.' As far as white society was concerned, unless you were using your land to grow crops or fence in animals, you really did not need, or in fact deserve that land. This was especially true if you were of another 'race.' Even more condemning was the fact that being of another race meant being, in a sense, not human. As the Native People have been associated with nature (i.e. savage, children of nature), they themselves were considered a part of nature by white society, and could also be ruled over like domesticated animals (another dimension to white-Indian interaction). Just to throw another aspect in, although the Native People of the Northeast were indeed known for their "intensive horticulture," Euro-Americans still did not recognize this as ownership of land. One such reason that led to this conclusion was the fact that Indian women were the main farmers, not men. Not only were women in charge of all aspects concerning horticulture, women usually also owned (or exercised the 'right of use' of) the land she tilled. This was a crazy thought among Western culture because the farmer was a person of power – it was the farmer who 'tamed' and ruled the land. Only men (white Christian men) were assigned the special privilege to do this. Men were the rulers of nature, as the Bible dictated. Not only were these female farmers penalized for being a 'product of nature' because of their race, but, women of any race were also considered to be connected to nature, and to be ruled over by men. The idea of indigenous women 'ruling' over land they owned was outrageous, one might even say un-Christian for the times. There was even an Iroquois treaty voided because the land being sold was not that of the leaders who signed the document. It was farmland, which meant it was owned by the women of this particular village. The women renegotiated their terms and the land was finally sold under the women's authority.

*(For more information on the connection of oppressing women, culture, and nature, search under the subject of ecofeminism)*

(c) Native men were not the only targets of white fears; black men also unjustly came under fire, accused of being more animal than man and 'unable to stop himself' from sexually assaulting white women. Obviously, because the supposed victims sought are always white women, this propaganda was circulated purposely to raise anger and distrust of men of these races. The KKK was especially known to spread strong, emotional messages, using language and images (artwork) that drummed up images of fair, white girls being violently, sexually assaulted. Much of this strategy was already used against Indian men. White women and girls believed they would be violated if ever in the hands of Native men. When women were captured, adopted, and returned to white society, one of the first details many women would relate of their adventure was their astonishment in the non-sexual treatment of the Indian men in their presence. They were honestly surprised to not be raped! In fact, it was

actually many white men who seemed to be 'unable to control themselves' from sexually assaulting Indian women! Jesuits (among others) recorded that many Native Peoples had a serious distrust of white people and their Christian religion based in part because of white men they had already had contact with, who called themselves Christian, and violated Native women and girls (among lying, stealing, and other negative social and criminal behavior).



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Maple  
Sugar  
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