INDIAN NATION(S): AMERICAN INDIANS BETWEEN STEREOTYPE AND REALITY

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Contents

Abstract:

What are American Indians, and how have they been conceptualized by non-Indian culture? This presentation offers some introductory thoughts especially with relation to the nature/civilization dichotomy.

Contents:

- Identity In A Tribal Context
- 2. Nature Vs./& Civilization
- 3. Stereotypes
- 4. Sources

Is there a specific "American Indian" identity?

- Dichotomy:
 indigenous nations as tribal,
 Western nations as non-tribal
- misconstrual of Western structures, failure to realize the complexity of the internal composition of Western nations, the West seen as monolithic (an own and attributed stereotype) - allowing for tribe/state dichot.

- □ tribal identity as pre-modern?
- re-establishment of tribal/clan structures in modern surroundings (regionalisms, extended family and friends, work collectives, alumni & other associations, gangs, "networking")
- □ alas: "classical"tribal structures v. tribalism

- problems of early anthropology: Henry Lewis Morgan / Margaret Mead misconstrual/misleading (property, meaning of matrilineal structures, polygamy, pacifism, ecologism)
- difference in structures of small tribes and nationlike tribal structures or empires

Investigating the Nature-Civilization dichotomy

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- Frederick Jackson Turner"The Significance of the Frontier in American History"
- "Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development (Turner 30)
- "The most significant thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land (31)
- "The wilderness masters the colonist. [..] at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish [..] Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [..] here is a new product that is American. (32)

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2. Nature vs./& Civilization

"The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. ... Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In first, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. ... The fact is that here is a new product that is American. (32)

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First Landing SP, Virginia

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2. Nature vs./& Civilization



Jamestown NHP, Virginia

- Dichotomy: Nature / Civilization
- □ Association Game

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Nature

- wilderness
- freedom of choice
- dangerous
- pure
- contagious
- green
- □ animals
- decaying
- untouched
- empty / of human beings / of civ

Civilization

war

- machines
- □ rules
- a pretext
- morality
- property
- hierarchy
- borders
- protection from nature
- overpopulation
- disease
- hypocrisy
- pollution
- medicine, protecting social structures
- religion

- Indians associated with Nature
- Westerners associated with Civilization

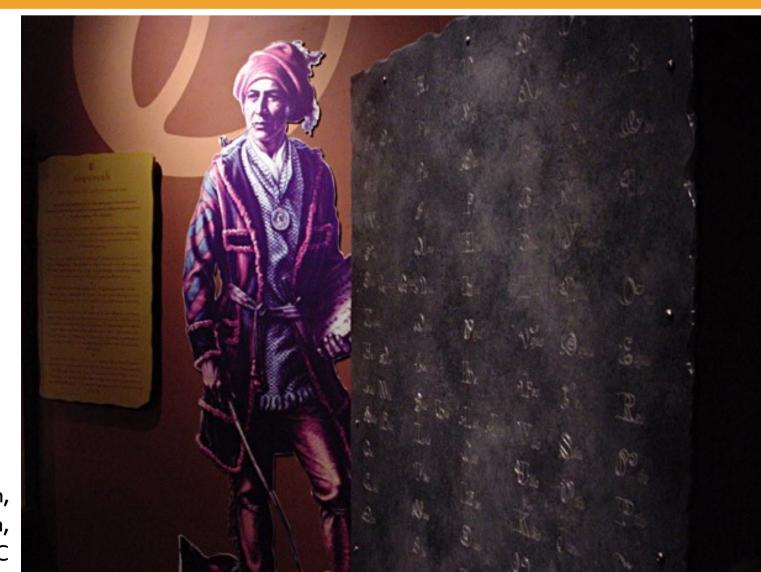
 teleological view: per aspera ad astra / "overcoming" nature / misunderstandings about the human animal (instinctive behavior, naturalness of culture)

- civilization as adaptation
- adaptation dependent upon local circumstances
- Diamond: geographical distribution of resources,
 utilization of resources

 result: American Indians, be it small tribes or great empires, maximized their degree of utilizing natural resources

□ Indian Givers: resources, technology

Indian Givers: politics



Sequoyah, Cherokee Museum, Cherokee IR, NC

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Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde NP,

How have Indians been represented?

Noble Savage (Cooper, May, Costner)

□ representations of modern indian types in recent media: trickster (Hawkeye Pierce on M*A*S*H), scout (Hawk on Twin Peaks), sensitive elder (Chakotay on Voyager), wisdomkeepers (Navajo elders on The X-Files)

■ Where is the true Indian?

3. Stereotypes

Ignorant/Techno-mage Westerner

- stereotypes having a life of their own (memetics)
- stereotypes are for storytelling and simplifying
- positive/negative stereotypes
- what happens if stereotype guides perception more thoroughly and is either confirmed or violated

- Noble Savage stereotype
- benefits: accumulation of niceties, speaking to desires within Western civilization, speaking to selfimage of Indians, perfect memetic fitness for propagation
- fitness of stereotype not necessarily means a beneficial influence on humans

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Dichotomy: real/imagined (constructed)

□ is there a "there" there?

3. Stereotypes

basis for constructions

□ recognition of constructions / selective utilization & adoption of constructions

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Cherokee Museum, Cherokee IR, NC

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3. Stereotypes



US Capitol with Indian-looking statue of freedom

4. Sources

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- for a selection of pictures from Indian Reservations, visit <u>www.philjohn.com/ndn</u>