

Stereotyping American Indians

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There is hardly a nation on our planet which has never been subject to ethnic stereotyping, but American Indians have always suffered from it, and maybe even more than any other people. At times stereotyping reaches such a degree that for a person who is not very knowledgeable about American Indian history, culture, traditions and behavior, all their nations merge into a generalized image – often false – of an American Indian: “If today many people are unaware that American Indians still exist, there are even more people who have no idea at all about their life before the appearance of the Europeans in America”(Уайт 14). Let’s try to understand the causes of stereotyping American Indians and check if those stereotypes are true or false.

An ethnic stereotype is a simplified generalized image of an ethnic group built on prejudice, emotional evaluation, and with the lack of sufficient knowledge. Such images are often false and offensive for the representatives of the stereotyped group. As Steven Baggs has remarked, “People are taught to stereotype other people. Stereotyping is a learned form of classifying and labeling others based on inaccurate information or assumption rather than on factual knowledge.” There are numerous factors that help create stereotypes, such as misunderstanding of the customs, traditions, behavior and world outlook of a person, state policy and the type of relationship between the government and a particular ethnic group, stereotyping in literature, cinema, mass media. Those and a few other factors are, in fact, the reason for the appearance of a stereotype, which symbolizes with the greatest expressiveness, as a rule, an image of a particular person, a whole nation, or some other phenomenon with its characteristic traits and determinative ideas. However, no image can be once and for all invariable; it inevitably transforms in the course of time, like life itself. Stereotypes may change, sometimes even to diametrically opposite ones, and American Indians are a wonderful corroboration of this. They have had a detached status in the American society from the very beginning, and though the USA and Canada are the examples of ethnic variety and tolerance, native peoples continue to stand out among other ethnic groups who live in those countries, and their stereotypes have spread all over the world. So, let’s go to history.

In 1492 Columbus “discovered” America and, having met the aboriginals, erroneously named them “Indians” (being sure of the fact that he had arrived in India). That name was later applied to all Natives of the three Americas, North, Central, and South, which in itself shows shallow generalization. To my mind, that very moment can be considered the beginning of stereotyping American Indians, for although Columbus at his time could be ignorant of the existence of many different separate American Indian groups, his followers for a long time just preferred not to pay attention to the fact at all.

Soon, with the beginning of the colonization of the new continent, two new stereotypes appeared (they are usually mentioned as the first ones): the “cruel warrior” and “noble savage.” American Indians quickly became an obstacle in the struggle of the Europeans for the new lands, and as soon as the former realized it, the confrontation with the invaders began. The native nations had been at war with each other over the centuries, and every feat on the battlefield brought fame and honor. If we also bear in mind that the upbringing of American Indian youths presupposed that they were fearless, adroit, sturdy warriors since childhood, it becomes evident that they did everything in their power to defend their lands and independence. Thus, in the eyes of the Europeans, the American Indian turned into a *cruel bloodthirsty warrior*. A great number of groups had to fight the Europeans, but we should remember that those were compulsory measures of self-defense. In daily life the same people could be peaceful farmers, hunters, and fishers.

With time the ideas of Enlightenment humanitarianism started to strengthen themselves on the continent, and the image of a *noble savage* replaced the aggressive stereotype. It is quite possible that it appeared from the observation of the lifestyle of the above-mentioned warriors in peaceful periods. For the first time the expression “noble savage” was used by John Dryden in his play *The Conquest of Granada* in 1670, but it reached the peak of popularity in the 18th century and is often associated with the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. A “noble savage” Indian lived in harmony with nature, was generous, devoted, unselfish, innocent, unable to lie, courageous, in good physical form; he despised luxury, had natural mind and inborn wisdom (“Noble Savage”).³ This stereotype was described especially vividly in literature, where such a person often was either the main character or his companion. The well-known examples are J.F. Cooper’s Chingachgook, K. May’s Winnetou and many others, and among present-day characters Tonto from the stories, TV, and radio-scripts of *The Lone Ranger*. It is quite obvious that this stereotype is precisely opposite to the previous one and is the extreme idealization of the native peoples of America.

The above-mentioned basic stereotypes of American Indians – that of a “cruel warrior” and “noble savage” – today to a greater or lesser extent can be referred to as the property of history, but we cannot deny that sometimes they are still met with sometimes. Nevertheless, the 20th and 21st centuries offer a much greater variety of images and phenomena connected with American Indians, which have become stereotypes. Let’s discuss some of them.

Cinema has played an important role in the formation of present-day romantic stereotypes. Even now there are people who believe that *all American Indians look alike*. Usually, their appearance is described as the following: swarthy-bronze skin, long straight or braided black hair, dark-brown eyes. But the abundance of mixed marriages in the recent centuries has also made an impact on their appearance: today some American Indians can hardly be distinguished from the Europeans.

The same is applied to a number of objects, in particular *clothes* and *horses*. The stereotype states that all American Indians wear war bonnets made of feathers and national costumes, and ride horses with a Hollywood war-cry. In fact only outstanding people of the tribe who had distinguished themselves during battles wore

war bonnets, usually on some solemn occasions and only sometimes at war. The Europeans often thought the attire for such solemn occasions to be the traditional dress. As for horses, today American Indians hardly ride them more than an average farmer or horse-fancier. All these paraphernalia can be seen only at pow-wows, which became a good tradition not long ago, while in daily life there are the jeans, T-shirts, shirts and sneakers of a common American.

Another stereotyped misconception is that if a person is an American Indian, he or she should have an *Indian name*. It is often the case, but not the rule. At the same time, almost everyone has a Euro-American name.

We find an echo of the “noble savage” idea in the mass assurance that *all American Indians are deeply spiritual and are the keepers of the original beliefs, wisdom and traditions of their nation*, that they communicate with the spirits of nature, and hold all rites and ceremonies on a regular basis. In reality not all Native Americans know their mother tongue, not to mention the details of the traditional spiritual life of their nation. There are the esoterics, the traditionalists, but even such representatives of the Native people (no offence meant) can hardly be called full-fledged bearers of all spiritual knowledge of a particular nation, as over the centuries of assimilation and acculturation part of that knowledge underwent considerable change, and some of it, unfortunately, was lost. Ceremonies do reappear in the recent decades, but, again, not all – just some of them, and often in a transformed mode.

Shamanism is often considered an essential part of tribal life. This institution was transformed as well and has given birth to such varieties as neo- and urban shamanism. Still, traditional shaman practice continues to exist, though it is not so widespread as before. It is important not to confuse medicine men with frauds (often called “plastic shamans”). The term “shaman” itself, of course derives from Native Siberian peoples and not Native Americans.

A common error is that *all American Indians live on reservations*. In fact, the majority (64%) live in cities. Some people return to their reservations only on holidays, while some others have lost any ties with them whatsoever or were born and raised outside.

One of the latest stereotypes concerns *gaming*. It is believed that the greater part of the native population of North America gets income from it. Usually, casinos are mentioned in this connection. However, far from all nations own casinos (only 40% of them), and there are even fewer prosperous ones. Thus, this business is profitable for only a small percent of American Indians.

Perhaps the stereotype which tells upon present-day American Indians in the most negative way is that of *an idler, a burden for society*, who lives solely on the dole which he receives from the state from the money of taxpayers. No doubt, the level of unemployment among American Indians is rather high (32%). But 68% do earn their living. More than that, the number of Native people with higher education is increasing, and there appear more specialists in different fields.

Another opinion connected with the above-mentioned one is that of *epidemic alcoholism* of the indigenous peoples. Unfortunately this phenomenon exists, mostly on reservations, where the standard of living is usually lower than in cities, but there are various tribal and governmental programs aimed at active struggle with it. Besides, it is not so “epidemic”.

Finally, American Indians often noted how tourists exclaimed in surprise after having arrived at reservations and seen the people who looked very much like themselves: “And where are the Indians?!” According to a common opinion (sometimes even that of well-educated people), *there are no more living Indians left*. Probably they think that all native population has died out. In the opinion of others, there are no “real Indians” left. The truth is that it is difficult to find a full-blood American Indian today, but membership criteria in tribes allow their members to have mixed blood in varying degrees. Time changes, together with people. This is an axiom, and it is not possible (more than that, it’s useless) to “revive” those Indians who were so stereotypically depicted by Hollywood.

Stereotyping appears not only in people’s consciousness and, as a result, their behavior, but in all spheres of life. Let’s take only three of commonly used stereotypical phrases about American Indians in the English language: *Indian princess*, *Indian time*, *Indian giver*. Euro-Americans called almost any pretty native girl an “Indian princess,” thus attempting to show their respect for her and hinting at her noble birth. They did not take into consideration the fact that there have never been princesses in the social hierarchy of North American Indians. “Indian time” means the possibility of being late even for an appointment, sometimes a great deal late. Though such a phenomenon could occur among American Indians, it arose from the norms of their world outlook and psychology, which were different from those of the Europeans. The phrase “Indian giver” sounds offensive altogether, meaning a person who takes his gifts back. The expression appeared in the Colonial period, when American Indians gave the new settlers some objects for temporary use, but the latter regarded them as gifts. The above-mentioned and a number of other expressions are the product of misunderstanding, but they have taken deep root in the language and continue to carry its erroneous, often negative connotation, not only in the English-speaking environment.

Both words and images create false ideas about the indigenous peoples of North America. The USA still remembers a series of court hearings of the 1990s on the effort of American Indians to ban the use of Indian mascots in the names of sports teams. Such mascots (names and images) are offensive for many tribes: “Washington Redskins,” “Chief Wahoo,” and others have already become classical examples. But one can meet symbolism which is either insulting for the Native peoples or is a forgery of their cultural objects (which also ruins their reputation and deprives them of their legal income) almost everywhere today, starting from ethnic shops all around the globe up to papier-mâché statues and images in bars, night clubs, casinos, etc. Paradoxically, in a few cases American Indians use such a “masquerade” for benefit, but this is an exception rather than a rule – for example, show-ceremonies for tourists.

To find out more about what images of American Indians people have nowadays I carried out a small survey. There were only two questions asked: “What

were, in your view, American Indians like before the 20th century?” and “How do you imagine present-day American Indians?” Most of the 30 respondents were female students ranging from 16 to 21 years of age (77%), while the others (23%) were teachers and adults in the age range of 33 to 61. All of them were Russians. The results show that the majority picture American Indians of the past as tanned people with long, dark hair, wearing feathers with war paint on their faces and sometimes going half-naked, who have their own unique culture, observe their traditions and rituals, make their living by hunting and/or fishing, and often carry a bow and arrows or a tomahawk. They are independent and freedom-loving, courageous, strong and proud, but sometimes naïve and trusting, very close to nature, and not accepting alien cultures. They often practice shamanism, have “strange” names, live in wigwams or tepees, smoke pipes, and may have a low standard of living. If we sum it up, we will get the romantic stereotype which is close to that of the “noble savage.” Some people confessed that those are mainly the ideas they got from films or books, which proves that the latter play a very important role in stereotyping.

Present-day American Indians, according to the survey, are mostly assimilated and enjoy the benefits of Western civilization. Other replies differ: some of the respondents believe that they resemble Euro-Americans (17 replies), others that they haven’t changed much in appearance (6 replies). Some believe that they are dying out (or have died out) as a nation (5) or that they still exist and live on reservations (3) or in cities (2). They continue practicing their cultural traditions in their daily life (6), or at least on some special occasions (3), – and their cultures have almost vanished (2). As we see, the general idea about the assimilation and the preservation of American Indian cultures at the same time is quite true to life. As for the rest, the respondents usually had to guess, and that’s why their answers differ so greatly. Especially astonishing is the stereotype about the “vanishing nation.” It means that we seem to have more information (much of it is stereotyped) about the past of American Indians and lack information about their present lives.

Thus, we have arrived at the following conclusions. There are too many ethnic stereotypes of American Indians. They change in the course of time, and new ones appear. Owing to a number of historic reasons this ethnic group has probably suffered from stereotyping the most, and it causes both moral and material damage. Today stereotypes can be met everywhere, and they have become so customary that sometimes they are used even unconsciously. Literature and cinema have played a great role in their formation, but theirs is not the only influence. The main cause of stereotyping is the lack of information, and this, in turn, is the problem with a system of education, which often restricts acquaintance with the history and culture of Native peoples of the planet to a very brief, general idea, a collection of stereotyped facts. Fortunately, in recent years the situation has started to change for the better, but we should admit that any society cannot completely get rid of stereotypes. Still it is possible to try to look at the reality, and not at false images.

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