

THE NATIVE AMERICAN RESEARCHER: ANOTHER VIEW OF HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

DONALD L. FIXICO

Within the last score of years, an increasing number of Native Americans have been researching in libraries and archives across the country. They come seeking information about themselves and their people. Written documents—treaties, diaries, military records, and government reports—created by literate “white men” during the early years of contact between Indians and whites are the existing sources for answers to questions that Native Americans research. They wish to see for themselves what the “white man” has written about them.

Other researchers have examined the same materials, but Native Americans frequently perceive them differently. This different perception yields another interpretation of historical documents. The following hypothetical example helps to illustrate the differences in perception between Indians and other researchers, and thus provides some insight into the Native American interpretation.

Envision a forest. A member of the dominant industrial society typically sees the forest in terms of individual objects: a specific tree, a deer, or a bird. This initial concentration on the tree or other object then shifts to thoughts on how best to utilize it. The forest represents a base of natural resources for mankind’s use. The mainstream person then generates ideas of clearing the forest for a living area, perhaps cutting timber for economic gain, or possibly developing some wood-product project. In contrast, the traditional Native American visualizes the forest as a “whole” living entity and contemplates its total meaning. The forest is one small segment of the earth’s countryside, and is actually a cellular particle of the entire universe.

The concept of the “whole,” consisting of numerous member entities, is the general basis of many tribal philosophies. These tribespeople see themselves in a general manner as members of the harmonious unison of all things. They express themselves in generalizations, and they tend to generalize answers to questions that may

request detailed information. This is a common characteristic among a majority of traditionalists, who would visualize the full scope of the scenic forest and consider its environmental conditions. But rather than concentrating on ways to utilize the forest, the Native American ponders his/her relationship with it.¹

The Indian researcher's cultural background influences his/her perception of historical documents. The native researcher may find important information stated in a document that is not apparent to a trained archivist. The Native American perceives the document differently because of different norms and a value system that is separate from that of the mainstream culture.² To complicate this point, the divergent cultures of the Native American population account for possibilities of additional Indian interpretations; even though tribes from the same culture area have similar lifestyles, they may have separate philosophies. For example, in the Southwest Culture Area, both the Hopi and Tewa Pueblo world views are complex, but they differ significantly in conceptualization. For the Hopi, a cosmic heart manifests a predestined plan for all of Hopi life. Among the Tewa, a conceptual system of seasonal moieties exists; their spiritual actions guide the course of Tewa life.

The degree of identification with traditional cultures also influences perception. The closer one is to a native culture, the more likely a nativistic interpretation. Conversely, the more the Native American researcher is assimilated into mainstream American life, the less chance of a traditional interpretation.

Formal education is another factor affecting interpretation of documents. Generally two types of Indian researchers frequent libraries and archives. Some have college educations and may be historians, anthropologists, or of other academic disciplines. Others, who are without formal research training, travel to libraries and archives for different reasons than the scholars do. Their research needs have a more "practical" basis, as determined by their tribes' interests. Gathering information about the tribe is the general objective for the tribal researcher.

Currently, many tribal groups are involved in court claims and federal-tribal recognition cases. Usually the tribal governments finance such research with federal funding, employing members of the tribe to carry out the work. In order to obtain tribal recognition, the federal government requires proof of historical continuity as a tribal community. In addition, government regulations mandate a complete genealogy of the entire community—a monumental task. Such tedious work is ultimately rewarded when the group receives official recognition as a "tribe," thereby qualifying for federal services and rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution. However, fact-finding research remains central to tribal needs even after

federal recognition is obtained, as the tribe pursues specific claims and entitlements. In quest of these historical and genealogical studies, the tribal researchers set out for the libraries and archives.

The scholarly environments of different repositories require some adjustment for any user, but the Indian researcher may feel more uncomfortable than most. Immersed in formal facilities and confined by unfamiliar regulations, both traditionalist and academic researchers are sometimes inhibited from concentrating thoroughly on documents that will yield the best information to meet their tribes' needs.³ New surroundings, in a strange city and staffed by non-Indians, have to become familiar to the researcher. Short-term superficial socializing stifles an Indian person who is accustomed to deep and long-lasting friendships. Requesting assistance may cause discomfort for the Native American who is accustomed to having his/her needs taken care of without asking. Among Indians needs are anticipated, making verbal requests for assistance unnecessary. For this reason, the researcher may interact only limitedly with a library or archives staff. Such behavior makes the researcher appear unfriendly and not interested in pursuing communication with the staff. Staff persons need to be cognizant of this possibility and should exercise patient understanding. Perhaps offering general information that other researchers customarily know may initiate a bond of trust between the archivist and the Native American researcher, thus establishing an open line for conversation. A friendly display of sensitivity for the researcher's needs for materials, expressed in a respectful manner, will also enhance communication. Anticipating needs of the Indian researcher and following through with assistance indicates to the researcher the hospitable nature of the library or archives.

Traditional learning patterns also affect Native American research methods. Traditional patterns have long proven dependable and effective, so the researcher may apply them when adjusting to new research working environments, even though they may not be applicable. Such learning techniques are a means of education in tribal cultures. During the zenith of Indian societies in the 1800s, the methods of "observation" and "imitation" proved reliable. Elders performed tasks and practiced their crafts while the young observed. After paying devoted attention to the elders over a length of time, the youths imitated the elders in basketmaking, wood-carving, or other tasks.⁴ This type of visual education was a primary learning method, and was so popularly used that it practically disallowed the development of written tribal languages. In place of writing, pictographs developed into a fine art for some tribes. Glorious events and chronologies of the seasons were recorded in hide paintings, wampum belts, and artworks, documenting the Indian version of history.

Cultural influences direct the course of traditional Indian logic; hence the solution to a problem will differ from that of a mainstream individual's deductive reasoning.⁵ Among Indians, "trial-and-error" problem solving is performed differently than among European-based cultures. Learning from mistakes is a fundamental method of education; it requires time, but confidence in this "old way" of learning is maintained. The Native American may continue to rely upon trusted trial-and-error methods when he/she encounters mainstream conditions. The foreignness of non-Indian learning situations frequently disrupts the course of Native American logic in problem-solving situations encountered while researching. By instinct the researcher may attempt to solve a problem by likening it to a similar one that was encountered at another research facility. For instance, trial-and-error, rather than deductive reasoning, may be employed to interpret finding aids or to follow complex instructions when using new research facilities.

The following hypothetical example illustrates how their different cultural backgrounds may determine the way a traditional Indian and a mainstream person would react to a given situation. If a heavy rainstorm occurred and a river began to swell, with its flooding waters threatening both an Indian's and a "white man's" homes, their approaches to the crisis would differ. Upon realizing the danger of losing his home, the traditional Indian would simply collect his people and belongings, then leave. His logic determines that life is of utmost importance. Lodges can be rebuilt or new ones can be constructed; the first priority is to protect the people. The Indian, having learned to respect nature, will not alter the environment for fear of jeopardizing his position in the scheme of the universe. The "white man," a more sedentary individual, would attempt to protect his home. Believing it to be all right to alter the environment to meet his needs, he would construct a dam to divert the flooding waters away from the house. Two culturally-determined responses will have produced different solutions to the same problem.

The past experiences of Indian-white contact corroborate the acute cultural differences between the two peoples. Simultaneously, continuous contact between the two races introduced relevant change among Native Americans. The degree of contact that tribal groups have had with American culture dictates the amount of change that occurs in Indian lifestyles and native cultures. The Chippewas of the western Great Lakes are such a case: the people have foregone much of their traditional Ojibway culture.⁶ Continual trade relations, missionary proselytism, and general traffic of the "white man" throughout their homeland undermined their traditional culture. Euroamerican cultural items replaced traditional

items, even though the basic native identity and Indian behavior survived. Conversely, tribes like the pueblo groups of the southwest have secluded themselves more from contact with white Americans and continue to view the world from a more purely native viewpoint.

The written nature of historical documents also affects the researcher's perception. Records of the contact experience between Indians and whites, as well as information about Native Americans, were produced largely by white authors in the form of treaties, letters, diaries, journals, reports, and early books. Researchers utilize these written records extensively, but they should be cognizant of the written word's limitations. The written word fails to convey either the passions or the nuances expressed via the spoken word in Indian oratory.

When the Iroquois, for instance, convened in council, it was a spiritual as well as a political affair. The participants purified themselves, so that all of their senses would be sterile to hear, speak, and see all that was said. The spoken word had power, penetrating the spiritual dimension of the council as communication radiated between the souls of the participants, touching their hearts and minds. Listening was as important as speaking in council for understanding the intentions of a friend or foe. Indian oratory was spoken from the heart and was often emotional, with bodily gestures stressing relevant points. Generally the oratory related to themes of nature, exemplifying the harmonious bond between people and animals and plants.

Attempts to transcribe Indian oratorical speeches or to translate them into the English language are problematic and raise immediate difficulties. Interpreters are not able to translate verbatim, therefore losing much of the expression of tribal philosophies and native attitudes. Moreover, the numerous tribal languages and various tribal philosophies complicate translations. In addition, fundamental linguistic differences and different dialects have increased over the years. Basic linguistic differences are illustrated by the Hopi language, which has no separate tenses for verbs, distinguishing very little among the past, present, and future. The Hopi believe time is continual, and trying to translate their version of a historical event would omit much of their tribal interpretation.⁷

Written documents have further limitations in regard to their basic origins. Past events involving tribal groups were recorded by literate whites, who held preconceived notions about Indians and who made superficial judgments. Many of the observers who recorded historical events and described Indian culture distorted history and neglected the importance of the tribal cultures. Sometimes unconsciously, they wrote with a slanted bias against Native

Americans, resulting in careless inaccuracies. Moreover, provincial and ethnocentric attitudes cast Native Americans in a negative light, portraying a predetermined barbaric image of the "wild savage" and deluging Indian people with negative stereotypes.⁸

This is not to say that all ethnographies recklessly branded Indians as an evil race. Nor were all studies poorly done. Most early ethnographers had good intentions, but unawarely wrote erroneous information. Lacking sufficient knowledge about Indian people, the observers victimized the Red Man for years to come with harmful literature. In the Southeast, the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws were depicted as uncivilized savages when actually they were more advanced than their white neighbors in many ways. In spite of this, some accurate information from the works of early ethnographers such as James Adair and William Bartram, both of whom travelled among the southern tribes, have provided primary information about Indian people. In addition, such early anthropologists as A. L. Kroeber, Clark Wissler, and others have made important contributions from their field studies among tribal groups. But periodically anthropologists have been criticized, sometimes rightfully, for abusively exploiting Indian people for information.

Oral history was the Indian counterpart to the "white man's" written history of Indian-white relations. Practice of oral tradition accounts for the same historical events as do written documents, and although the memories of individuals are depended on, the events are relived. This quality gives oral history greater dimension than written history. The Indians' own accounts of history were based primarily on oral traditions. Memories today of past events include the emotions and intensity exhibited during treaty-making, battles, and the telling of stories that described vividly native leaders and their peoples. Elders shared their knowledge via the oral tradition, passing down historical accounts of the people from one generation to the next. Whether myth, legend, tale, or song, the oral tradition was a means of sharing knowledge, and it served several purposes. Oral accounts contained parables and lessons, and the young people learned from them; morals of stories told by their elders enlightened them on virtues, values, and the importance of respecting taboos. Stories and tales served in other ways as well. Although they were entertaining, frightening stories were used to discipline the young when they misbehaved. At the philosophical level, the oral tradition explained the origins of the people and the creation of the universe, and it prophesied the future.

In a desperate effort to preserve information before the passing of the elders, the Doris Duke Indian Oral History projects were begun in the late 1960s.⁹ This massive undertaking consisted of several

projects located at seven universities throughout the country. Each project covered a particular geographic area and the tribes living there. Interviews with Indian elders were collected to be transcribed for later research use. The primary plan was to capture the historical and cultural knowledge of the elders before it passed away with them. Other oral history projects include one at Grand Rapids, Michigan; another at Princeton University on southwestern pueblo culture; the Chicago urban Indian oral history collection; and a project supervised jointly by the Inter-tribal Council of the Washo, Paiute, and Shoshone in Reno, Nevada.

Oral history cannot stand alone as a single source for research, but it can be utilized in conjunction with written documents. Scholars continue to disagree over the research value of oral histories, claiming they are not as accurate as written historical documents. The strength of oral history is in providing information from the Indian point of view. Searching for the Native American viewpoint is a chief objective of Indian scholars. They pursue the human experience of their tribespeople, in addition to using the "white man's" version of history to produce a better understanding of their tribes. Non-Indian scholars have fallen short in portraying this human experience.

A common complaint among Indians is that all the history about them has been written by non-Indians. They criticize historical literature, alleging that misinformation and a lack of sensitivity have resulted in erroneous accounts. To compensate for these mistakes, many non-Indian scholars have inundated the poor Red Man with sympathy, but this deluge has led to romanticizing and further discrediting of Indians. Profuse literary sympathy has stamped Indians as "noble savages," whose descendants remain proud but will never live successful lives.

During the present generation, a rising number of Native American scholars are beginning to produce documented histories, blending the Indian viewpoint with information extracted from historical documents. This growing historiography exemplifies Native American responses to particular issues, such as Indian removal and the government's allotment and reservation policies. "Why Indian leaders responded to certain events in the manner they did" is the type of question that intrigues Native American scholars. On the whole, Indian scholars want to correct the inaccurate histories that have been written about their people. They possess the professional expertise to write new literature, describing how tribal behavior and cultural dynamics have influenced the same historical issues.

Immediate difficulties confront them, however, when they begin to use written documents that fail to provide sufficient information about the nature of Native Americans. In the process of having

received graduate school training, Indian scholars were influenced to think as non-Indians, which suppressed their creativity. If encouraged to explore their imaginations, influenced by their native backgrounds, they could provide valuable insight about their people in research studies. Ethnologies and notes kept by early anthropologists offer some assistance. Predictably, Native American scholars will extrapolate from these sources the research information they need to rewrite histories about their people, and will blend this data with their intuitive knowledge about their people.

Attempting to document the Indian viewpoint and finding adequate materials pertinent to the political positions of tribal leaders and their people's views on particular issues is not easy. This type of historiography can be both challenging and controversial because of the indifferent approach of traditional historiography. Application of social and cultural insights requires new types of historical analysis. Yet the Indian side of history has not been fully explored as a research area. The views and positions of white officials are well known, but trying to capture the viewpoints of Indian leaders through documents is elusive. Simultaneously, the need to understand Indian positions is imperative for comprehending both Indian and white sides of such issues as Indian removal, the legalities of federal-tribal relations, and other related issues of these two peoples' shared past. This would yield a truer historiography and present a more accurate explanation of American history.

Trying to rectify the limitations of existing historical documents may not be possible, but new avenues can be pursued for the future. Collecting records of Indian testimonies in current court cases, whether via audio- or video-tape or by transcript, would document contemporary Indian political positions in addition to yielding valuable historical and cultural information. Today's Indian elders are a plethora source of information. In recollecting precious memories about the past, the elders describe personalities and circumstances surrounding historical events. This inroad helps to understand better the role of the Red Man in American history. Earlier attempts to understand Indian behavior and the motivation for Indian actions should be reexamined, if not examined for the first time in some cases, in order to comprehend the complexities of Indian-white history.

Presently, collecting the minutes of tribal councils, government documents, and records of Indian organizations at the local and national levels is of major importance for future research in order to understand the Indian side. The records would reveal the nature of tribal politics, an area rarely studied by scholars. Currently, an increasing number of tribal records are being stored in tribal archives as Indians themselves take the initiative in preserving information about their past.

In summary, the attempts to establish historical continuity and to compile genealogies of their community groups are immediately imperative to many tribes as they strive for federal recognition. Normally, one strength of written records is in supplying leads for piecing together Native American genealogies. For instance, records of the Dawes Allotment rolls, annuity payment lists, records of Indian prisoners, treaty signatures, Indian agents' and teachers' reports, and missionaries' observations are important in tracing the history of Indian leaders, families, and kinship groups. Locating letters and deeds of literate Indians, especially during the reservation and allotment period of the late 1800s, would help provide information missing from genealogies. Retrieving bills of sale and the government tags assigned to Indians who received annuities—items that were often kept as souvenirs—would also be helpful for documentation.

Contemporary voting records of tribal elections, death certificates, marriage licenses, and baptismal records will be useful for genealogical studies in the future. Visual materials such as photographs are also helpful for identification purposes. During recent years, tribes have been increasingly active in printing newspapers, newsletters, and circulars. If systematically acquired by libraries and archives as they are produced, such records will years from now be valuable for identifying former tribal leaders and for substantiating the occurrence of events that may presently seem unimportant.

Archivists can assist in collecting Indian records by assessing the full value of documents relating to Native Americans. The cultural and kinship aspects of documents should not be overlooked, and these characteristics could be incorporated into cataloging practices. Working with Indian Americans would help archivists to better ascertain the values of documents. Keeping an open communication line with tribal groups as they build their own archives is good diplomacy, and providing assistance will establish good relations among everyone concerned with historical documents of the Indian-white experience. So far, tribes are just beginning to collect their own recent documentation.

In addition to tribal archives, university and historical society libraries continue to collect Native American documents. These consist largely of records pertaining to Indian-white relations derived from non-Indian sources, such as congressmen who were involved in federal-Indian affairs. Many such documents have been gleaned from larger collections of papers and cataloged for research use. Indian/missionary papers have received less research attention, but they are in sufficient supply and are also available in historical societies and universities. Federal archives and records centers and the National Archives are the largest collectors of government/Indian documents. Indian-only documents are usually in the form of

oral history interviews that universities, largely in the west, and Indian organizations are gathering. Few individual Indian collections comparable to the Carlos Montezuma Papers currently exist, but in the future such papers will become more plentiful and it will be interesting to see which institutions will house them. Indians who have held tribal offices and high positions in the federal government will need to deposit their papers somewhere.

As research becomes more expensive due to inflation, new avenues will have to be explored for making documents accessible. Perhaps some Native American materials can be microfilmed for interlibrary loan use or purchase. The future use of Indian documents will become especially important to Indian scholars and tribal researchers who will likely produce an increasing number of federal-tribal monographs, tribal reports, histories, and case claims. We can be assured that the Indian scholar and tribal researcher will be arriving more frequently at libraries and archives in their quests to locate pertinent documents about their tribes' past.

FOOTNOTES

1. Some years ago, Judieth Klienfield, an anthropologist, observed that children of the Tlingit Indian village of Angoon frequently crowded the local cinema and could recall minute details of the films they had watched. This extraordinary visual ability is applied as a learning technique among Native American groups. Estelle Fuchs and Robert Havighurst, *To Live on This Earth: American Indian Education* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1973), p. 122.
2. Studies that point out the different perspective of Indians from the mainstream include Robert C. Breuing, "Hopi Perspectives on Formal Education" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1973); and Laura M. Lowry, "Differences in Visual Perception and Auditory Discrimination Between American Indian and White Kindergarten Children," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 3 (July 1970): 359-363.
3. An Indian person considering his social position among non-Indians sometimes suffers socio-psycho maladjustment. A work addressing self-concepts is Roger Martig and Richard De Blassie, "Self-Concept Comparisons of Anglo and Indian Children," *Journal of American Indian Education* 12 (May 1973): 9-16. See also Robert Havighurst and Bernice L. Neugarten, *American Indian and White Children: A Sociological Education Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).
4. Some insight into traditional Indian learning methods is in J. A. Fitzgerald and W. W. Ludeman, "The Intelligence of Indian Children," *Journal of Comparative Psychology* 6 (August 1926):319-328.
5. Jamake Highwater's work, *The Primal Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), is a philosophical study of the Native American; the author demonstrates how Indians differ in their thinking from the dominant society.
6. See Virginia Rohrl, *Change for Continuity: The People of a Thousand Lakes* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981) about the changing way of life among the Chippewas.
7. See Benjamin Lee Whorf, "An American Indian Model of the Universe," in Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Liveright, 1975), pp. 121-129.
8. See Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).
9. Information about the Duke Indian Oral History projects is in Richard Ellis, "The Duke Indian Oral History Collection at the University of New Mexico," *New Mexico Historical Review* 48 (July 1973): 259-263.

The Society of American Archivists

Basic Manual Series

Series I

Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning
Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description
Archives & Manuscripts: Reference and Access
Archives & Manuscripts: Security
Archives & Manuscripts: Surveys

Price: \$4.00 each to SAA members, \$5.00 each to non-members.
Set of five—\$16.00 to SAA members, \$20.00 to non-members.

Series II

Archives & Manuscripts: Exhibits
Archives & Manuscripts: An Introduction to Automated Access
Archives & Manuscripts: Maps and Architectural Drawings
Archives & Manuscripts: Public Programs
Archives & Manuscripts: Reprography

Price: \$5.00 each to SAA members, \$7.00 each to non-members.
Set of five—\$20.00 to SAA members, \$30.00 to non-members.

To order the manuals and obtain a list of all titles published and distributed by SAA, write the Society of American Archivists, 330 S. Wells, Suite 810, Chicago, IL 60606.