

**The End of the Trail: A Socio-anthropological Perspective**

A Research Paper

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

SOC 101 sec. 03

by

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May 9, 2009

*“A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members” ~Mahatma Gandhi*

## **Introduction**

Over recent years very little has been published in regards to Native American populations living on the reservation systems. To this day most reservations are still without running water, electricity and other things that we, as Americans, would deem as normal. Gangs, violence and drugs seem to now be the normal for them. The Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, for example, has the highest teenage suicide rate in the United States and life expectancy is just 50, the lowest in the western world apart from Haiti. Many Native American feel that there is a widespread conspiracy to wipe them out. The coming pressures to assimilate are too great and with the rise of globalization many feel they have no choice but to leave the reservations in hopes of finding some means of income. Those who leave the reservations never go back and end up breaking off all ties to their families on the reservations. Ancient cultural traditions are almost gone and yet nothing is being said or done. Much of the American public remains quite ignorant to that fact that many people are still living in ‘third world’ conditions within the United States. <sup>1</sup>

The Native American reservation system is built upon a numerous amount of United States enforced laws and treaties, mostly all of which have been broken by the government itself. Racism to this degree is a factor that goes beyond mere prejudices against a people, but rather can be classified as systematic genocide. United States Constitutional Law should protect all people within its borders to the human freedoms and rights for all people. Ironically, this did not apply to those whom first occupied the vast territory of land. From President Andrew Jackson’s 1830 Indian Removal Act to the racism that still ensues in various parts of the country to this

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics by Republic of Lakotah - Mitakuye Oyasin; [http://www.republicoflakotah.com/?page\\_id=544](http://www.republicoflakotah.com/?page_id=544)

day, the question is then posed what next? Various indigenous created social movements have further perpetuated the long lasting history of Indian rebellion towards human justice, however, almost all of these movements failed. Our country deems the Holocaust during World War II as something unspeakable, yet it cannot see the irony between Nazi Germany and the United States treatment of the Native Americans. The only prime difference is that afterwards the United States just “gave up” and let the Indian tribal councils run the already wrecked and impoverished lands. Through these hard times it seems that little to nothing is being done for social radicalization neither of the Native American reservation system nor to bring about social justice for the people who live on the land. To this day there are still many injustices still continuing on Native soil from the corporations spilling toxic wastes into the reservations to the gathering of natural resources from the little land they have left. The questions should be posed, why haven't we heard of these this? And why isn't our government doing anything about it?

### **Historical Context**

Eurocentrism was of the first ideas to infect the minds of the people arriving in the New World. The rivalry that ensued from the earliest days of the colonies proved to be a lost cause. Many Native Americans were brought in by early Missionary Christian churches in order to eradicate them from their “savagery.” Frontiersmen pushed onwards across the Mississippi River and into the wilderness of America. Event after event unfolded from the Louisiana Purchase to the expansion of America through Manifest Destiny (which apparently excluded Native American rights) to the Civil War and lastly the wild crusades of Colonel George Armstrong Custer. The complex interwoven history of America and more specifically Native American history would take up volumes to describe, but alas we are fully aware of most of the main points

of historical reference to understand the overall context of what America was going through various points in time.

Oppression of Native Americans can be dated back to the times of the Spanish, followed by the Mexicans, and lastly the United States. Each of which had its own form of oppression and system for dealing with the 'Indian problem'. Native American land under both Spanish and Mexican rule was not anything compared to the United States control after the Louisiana Purchase. It seemed that the motive for the Spanish and Mexican government was that of conversion of the Indians into Christianity. This is still quite evident today when travelling into the Southwest, many amazing early Spanish adobe missions/cathedrals still exist and their sacred ceremonies have incorporated many of the Christian symbolism. Many of the Spanish were massacred by well organized revolts of Native Americans from California down into New Mexico. After many periods of struggle, the Spanish kept back from Native American affairs, as well did the Mexicans afterwards, many of whom by this point were of Mestizo descent and worked rather well along side Native American communities (for the most part). The United States that came later completely had a different agenda at hand; divide et impera (divide and conquer).

The United States used various techniques to impose the reservation system upon the Native American population those being bureaucracy (laws, land treaties and land trade), forced and indirect relocation, and lastly civilian militia groups (bounty and scalp hunters, etc). The annihilation of Native communities primarily on the East Coast served as a testimony of the things to come. Andrew Jackson's Indian removal act caused literally thousands of Native Americans to relocate across the Mississippi River into otherwise 'sanctioned locations'. This exile, otherwise known as the Trail of Tears, resulted in the relocation of 15,000 Cherokee

people and between 2,500-6,000 deaths. Furthermore, 46,000 Native Americans (exact numbers still unknown, but is estimated way over this official number) in total made the journey across the Mississippi River in order for the American government to obtain the land (around 25 million acres).<sup>2</sup>

Even years following the Civil War, which gave African Americans freedom, the United States still did not recognize the Native Americans as human beings.

“American blacks had become recognized as a species of human being by amendments to the Constitution shortly after the Civil War. Prior to emancipation they had been counted as three-fifths of a person in determining population for representation in the House of Representatives. Early Civil Rights bills nebulously state that other people shall have the same rights as “white people,” indicating that there were “other people.” But Civil Rights bills passed during and after the Civil War systematically excluded Indian people. For a long time an Indian was not presumed capable of initiating an action in a court of law, of owning property, or of giving testimony against whites in court. Nor could an Indian vote or leave his reservation. Indians were America’s captive people without any defined rights whatsoever.” (pg 7; *Custer Died for your Sins* by Vine Deloria, JR).

Struggle after struggle, massacre after massacre, the end resulted with all ‘wild’ Native American people forced to live on reservations across the United States.

The United States government as a means of assimilation process also started up Federal Indian Schools by which to ‘civilize the savages.’ In the book, *To Remain and Indian* by K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty, they give various educational factors throughout history in order to figure out the best way to address the Native American culture within the educational system. Within the historical context they address ‘Schools as “Civilizing” and

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<sup>2</sup>Indian Removal (1814-1858) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2959.html>

homogenizing institutions. Clearly the Federal Indian Schools for the various periods in time had one purpose, to help (if it was possible) elevate the status of the Indians by ridding them of their culture. The book thus addresses critical issues within Native American culture and education and how to better bridge the two. Furthermore, if Native American students are to learn, then they must employ the various teachings methods that are to their advantage and not disadvantage (such as the 'Western' way of approaching a problem).

### **Modern Day Control**

On August 29, 1911 in the remote town of Oroville in Northern California a man emerged from the wilderness. All attempts made to communicate with him ended in failure, he spoke nor understood any of the known Native languages in the surrounding areas. Anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber from Berkley University was called up to assess the man after long periods of study he concluded that the man had never been in any contact with the westernized world, and furthermore he was of an isolated tribe that was brutally massacred making him the last survivor of his people. Professor Kroeber named him Ishi, though his real name is unknown, due to a taboo of speaking owns own name. He was kept in one the storerooms in the Berkeley museum as a curiosity. This publicized event captured the world's imagination, the last "wild Indian," and many flocked to see him perform outside the Berkeley campus making bows and arrows, shelters, etc. He was seen, even through the Anthropologists eyes, more as a romanticized curiosity rather than a human being and there he lived in the storeroom until he died of tuberculosis in 1916.<sup>3</sup>

Today there seems to be a romanticized idea of the Native American reservations, and many New Age 'hippies' flock to see if they can somehow be incorporated into the tribes or at

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<sup>3</sup> Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America by Theodora Kroeber and Karl Kroeber

least partake in the sacred ceremonies. Most people assume they still dress in the traditional attire and live in tipis. Sadly, this is not the case. In recent times many of the various languages and traditions are fading away. It seems that most of the western cultural youth values have penetrated its way into the reservation system. Many of the youth today pick up on a lot of African-American 'ghetto styles' and have incorporated themselves as an independent 'rez style'. Much of the youth prefer to stay at home and watch television and could really care less about upholding their own cultural traditions. Furthermore, due to extreme poverty, many of the youth become involved in gangs and drugs which have a deeply negative impact on the community as a whole. Native Hip Hop, rap lyrics reflect the injustices and violence in daily life on the reservations and it seems to be a creative outlet for many of the youth.

For those who live on the reservation living under such a poor income, as in the cities, people are forced to purchase fast food. The leading cause of illness and death on the reservations are diabetes, it seems that Native Americans have a genetic predisposition to diabetes. And due to the lack nutritional food that was once available, they are forced to purchase food which is not at all good for them. There are many issues like this that arise yet there is a lack of media attention and lack of governmental assistance for the people living under these conditions. The only media report I could find about the conditions on the reservation was by the English-speaking AlJazeera network that did a several reports critical on the living conditions on the Pine Ridge Reservation. One of these news reports was entitled "Poverty USA" (November 16<sup>th</sup> 2007: available on Youtube), and presented series of depressing interviews with people living on the reservation. An example from this was a family of Lakota who was pushing a car (presumably because they could not afford gas) with a television in that back seat. When the interviewer asked what they were doing, the young man replied that they were going to take the

television to a nearby pawn shop and hopefully get some money in order to get something to eat. The interviewer then stated that it was a tragedy to which he replied, “ it ain’t a tragedy to me,... this is the everyday life to the Lakota.” The news report was very critical on the American government and what it’s not doing for the Lakota people on Pine Ridge Reservation, this goes without saying that something like this will never air on any American broadcasting channel.<sup>4</sup>

With the infant mortality rate at five times the national average it is no wonder that a lot of Native Americans living on the reservation system are becoming desperate and thus leave the reservation to pursue good paying jobs in order to survive. Many of these people do not return back to the reservation, thus as indirect form of assimilation takes place on behalf of the American society. According to the United Nations Committee on Genocide, they concluded with three modes of application; 1.) Physical Genocide (e.g. Nazi Germany), 2.) Biological Genocide (e.g. involuntary sterilization, etc), and 3.) Cultural Genocide. Cultural Genocide “includes all policies aimed at destroying the specific characteristics by which a target group is defined, or defines itself, thereby forcing them to become something else”. Some specific examples of this as “forced transfer of children... forced and systemic exile of individuals representing the culture of a group... prohibition of the use of the natural language... systematic destruction of books printed in the natural language, or religious works, or the prohibition of new publications... systematic destruction of national or religious monuments, or their diversion to alien uses [and] destruction or dispersion of objects through historical, artistic, or religious value and of objects used in religious worship.” (*Kill the Indian, Save the Man* by Ward Churchill pg. 6).

Even after Hurricane Gustav hit the lower Louisiana coast, the government paid millions in aid to Louisiana, yet completely neglected those living on the reservations whose homes were

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<sup>4</sup> AlJazeera Newsbroadcast (November 16, 2007): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq0Joi1ELps>

completely destroyed. Natives in that community feel that it is due to their non-cooperation with local governmental gas and oil companies who want access to the natural resources in the area. Because the Native American reservation is not federally recognized FEMA refused to help any of those in the community.<sup>5</sup> Native Americans feel that no matter who the president is, they in no way will help the dire circumstances in which they live, and that instead many stand to benefit from their own demise. Many average Americans feel however that they are well off and benefiting from the Indian Casinos across the country. This is simply not true, though the Casio's were created to attract tourism in order to fund local schools/homes, in some impoverished areas tourism is lacking thus the only people going to gamble are the Native Americans themselves.

There is also, however, a very ironic thing that is also taking place among minorities in the United States especially among Native American minorities. Despite being among the people who have been the most neglected throughout United States history, the Native American population still upholds itself with pride when serving in the United States military. Throughout every American war there has always been a high concentration of Native American soldiers from the beginning of our country, to the Civil War, and even to the World Wars. The Native population has been of strategic importance in the various wars that have been fought. The most importance of which was during World War II, the Japanese were able to break every single US military code imaginable, that was until they decided to the Navajo language as a means for code. It was that Navajo code that proved to be the most valuable and in turn helped save the United States in many of its important battles. Many of the soldiers who fought on behalf of the United States literally came back to nothing. What they fought so hard for in the end resulted with them being neglected once more. Many developed drinking problems and other drug-related issues. Even the most famous of Native American soldiers Ira Hayes, who fought in Iwo Jima,

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<sup>5</sup> AlJazeera (September 12, 2008): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUxj2Q43szo>

and who helped raise the American flag in that infamous photograph. He gained much fame from that one photograph but it was the harsh realities of everyday life that ended up taking a toll on him. He turned into a ravage alcoholic and by 1955 was found dead lying face down in his own blood and vomit.

Why is there such a need to fight for a country that has done nothing for the Native Americans but aid in their own destruction? Recent research shows the high number of Native Americans who are enlisting in the military. Is it that for them, they see no other options? Or do they pride themselves on their long history of being warriors to defend their homeland? “According to a study carried out for the US Defense Department in 1996, Native Americans have the highest record of service per capita in the US military when compared to other ethnic groups.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Taking Action**

The governmental hypocrisy at this point for the Native Americans becomes almost laughable now as time goes on. They feel as if there is nothing for them anymore and as a resort many find comfort in alcoholism and drugs. Much of the Native American activism from the 60's (such as Alcatraz, etc) and thereafter has been replaced with drugs and alcohol. A lot of the western values have been accepted and there seems to be a dissonance between who they are and what they should become. To this day there are very few grassroots movements striving for change within Native communities. Despite everything there are strives being made to radically change things. On December 20, 2007 the Lokota Nation officially broke away from the United States creating an independent Nation. In basic, because the United States did not follow the treaties set forth many years ago, the Lakota nation respectfully following the Vienna

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<sup>6</sup> Modern native Americans fight for military that once fought them;  
[http://rawstory.com/news/afp/Modern\\_native\\_Americans\\_fight\\_for\\_m\\_08202007.html](http://rawstory.com/news/afp/Modern_native_Americans_fight_for_m_08202007.html)

Convention protocol broke away from the original treaty and declared its independence. In order to join the Republic of Lakotah one must denounce their US Citizenship and in return you won't have to pay taxes.

Another example of extreme movements was that from the 1970's American Indian Movement otherwise known as AIM. During the various AIM conventions they baraded the different roads and were fully armed with weapons. "The concern of many Indians was to find a way to bring the Indian situation to the attention of the public...the nation also felt a sense of betrayal at the continual shifting of federal policies and at the frequent cuts in their funds from the poverty programs. Indian country seemed ready to explode when in state after state, there were incidents in which Indians were killed and no redress was made available to their relatives" (*Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence* by Vine Deloria Jr.). The purpose of the AIM was to bring these vast situations to the public's attention that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. An example of this was that of Raymond Yellow Thunder, an elder from the Pine Ridge Reservation, who was beaten by five whites and then stripped below the waist and pushed into the dance hall for the sole entertainment of the whites who were having a celebration. He was found dead several days later, beaten to death. The AIM movement sparked off a massive movement calling for all Native Americans to march into the town and occupy it as a sign of protest. This event did in fact did gain the much needed publicity to the movement, however, after much success it fell apart due to organizational disapprovals.

There are also grassroot movements in the United States taking action through more peaceful means such as the Longest Walk. A gathering of nations come together in San Francisco and walk across the country into Washington DC in order to bring awareness to the people in regards to their current situation (which originally started in 1978). From the original

1978 Walk, they decided in 2008 to start again and for each year they will have a theme (such as Helping the Earth). And in conclusion, it seems that there are many issues that need to be addressed and need to be carefully examined. The long United States history toward the Native American is one of hostility and genocide, the proper measures need to be taken into affect if anything is to radically change. These Native American-based social movements have its momentum and hopefully will keep on striving through peaceful means. And in the end who really knows what may end up happening..

## **Bibliography:**

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## Additional Resources Mentioned:

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([://www.republicoflakotah.com/?page\\_id=544](http://www.republicoflakotah.com/?page_id=544))

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\*Modern native Americans fight for military that once fought them;

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