

Of Myths and Realities: Implications and Consequences

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Myth: an ill-founded belief held uncritically, especially by an interested group.

Most of what has been written and also portrayed about Native Americans or American Indians in all kinds of medium is based on misconceptions of historical facts and a perpetuation of myths.

Let us examine some of the most common, popular and prevalent ones:

- ❖ Native Americans migrated over the Bering Strait from Siberia almost 12,000 years ago.
- ❖ The new world that Columbus found was a thinly peopled paradise of plants, animals, and hunter-gatherers with no civilization.
- ❖ The Aztecs practiced human sacrifice.
- ❖ Since initial contact, the Spanish conquistadores started intermarrying with the native indigenous people and produced the Mestizo whose descendents are the present-day Hispanics and Latinos.

Myth: Native Americans migrated to the Americas over the Bering Strait from Siberia almost 12,000 years ago.

Practically every book or article about Native Americans starts by stating that Indians originated in Asia and arrived in this hemisphere via the Bering Strait. Most scholars today simply start with the assumption that the Bering Strait migration theory was proved a long time ago. According to proponents of this theory, during the Pleistocene Era much of the oceans froze into glaciers, lowering the sea level almost 300 feet, forming a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. They postulate that during this time, groups of people followed animal herds over this land bridge, across northern Alaska, and down the east slope of the continental divide through the American Southwest, a passage relatively free of ice. This land bridge then disappeared when the glaciers melted, the oceans rose, and the continents were separated. These various people then spread throughout the Western Hemisphere and into North and South America. According to the theory, these nomads called Clovis people were the ancestors of the American Indians.

Realities

Scholars and popular science writers, in discussing the Bering Strait doctrine usually use words like “likely” and “probably”. William Laughlin, who is the acknowledged dean of American Bering Strait scholars pointed out, “Conditions in the interior [of Alaska] were severe, and **likely** only a few of its inhabitants found their way into North America; these wanderers **probably** became the ancestors of American Indians”. He has offered no concrete evidence in support of this theory. It seems that generations of scholars have simply accepted this idea at face value.

There are several problems with accepting this theory:

- New findings, new interpretations, the new developments in DNA continually create new theories and new arguments.
 - Example: According to a new article in the March 19, 2007 issue of Newsweek, Homo erectus who spread across Eurasia between 2 million and 1 million years ago, and long argued to be the predecessor to Homo sapiens; all died out and is not our ancestor after all, according to recent DNA.

- There are several “schools of archeological thought” as to when humans first entered the “New World” and considerable controversy as to the number of migrations from Siberia to Alaska.
 - Cactus Hill, Virginia: Points, blades, charcoal, fragments of animal bone were found dating 18,000 years ago – 6,000 years before the supposed Bering Strait crossing by the Clovis people.
- Many potential coastal sites are now submerged, making investigations difficult.
- Environmental and Physical Barriers were insurmountable:
 - The Indians would have two formidable mountain ranges blocking their migration eastward from Siberia to Alaska, the Khrebet Gydan and the Chukotskoye Nagor’ye.
 - Once the Indians reached the area we now know as Alaska, they would encounter a forbidding set of mountains both above and below the Arctic Circle.
 - The Baird, Schawat, Endicott, and Shublic chains on the north
 - The Kalyuh and Kuskokwim Mountains to the south
 - On reaching the Canadian border, they would encounter more mountains to surmount:
 - The Richardson Mountains and the continental divide of the northernmost chain of the Rocky Mountain group
 - The Ogilvie Mountains to the south
 - The massive Mackenzie mountains chain with the smaller Franklin Mountain to the east
 - Once they get over all these mountains, they are in a reasonably flat plain which is covered with a thick glacial sheet and not conducive for food or game.
- According to the Smithsonian Institution, so far scientists have found no technological affinities to relate Clovis, as these first Americans have been called, to the Asian Paleolithic.
- Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) research studies have shown similarities between American Indians and recent populations in Asia and Siberia; however, recently a fifth mtDNA lineage named “X” has turned up in living American Indians and in prehistoric remains for which there does not appear to be an Asian origin.
- Studies of the native languages of the Americas have shown them to be extremely diverse, representing nearly two hundred distinct families, some consisting of a single isolated language. Claims that these many languages descend from only three (or even fewer) separate linguistic stocks are regarded by most linguistic specialists as extremely unlikely.

SIDE NOTE: Indians believe that they originated in this hemisphere.

Each tribe has its own creation story and most are complicated.

Some tribes believe that they emerged from this continent from sacred, underground sites.

- The Mexica (Aztecs) believe that they emerged through five suns or epochs.
- The Dine (Navajo) believe they passed through four separate worlds through a hole in the sky and now live in the Fifth World.
- The Choctaw believe that at the beginning there was a great mound called Nanih Wiya, and from this mound that the Creator fashioned the first of the people who crawled through a long, dark cave into daylight.

Other tribes believe that this continent was covered with water and they emerged from under the water.

- The Cherokees believe that in the beginning, there was just water and that all the animals lived above it and the sky was overcrowded. One day Dayuni’si, the water beetle, volunteered to explore below the surface to the bottom and all he found was mud which he brought back to the surface. After collecting the mud, it began to grow in size and spread outwards until it became the Earth as we know it.
- The Creek believe that the world was originally entirely underwater. The only land was a hill, called Nunne Chaha, and on the hill was a house, wherein lived Esaugetuh Emissie (“master of breath”). He created humanity from the clay on the hill.
- The Iroquois account of creation is that in the beginning there was no earth to live on, only a watery abyss; but up above, in the Great Blue, there was a community called the Sky World. A helldiver went down to the bottom of the sea and brought back mud in his beak. He found a turtle, smeared the mud onto its back, and dove down again for more. Ducks also brought beaks full of the ocean floor to spread

over the turtle's shell. The beavers helped build terrain, making the shell bigger. The birds and the animals built the continents until they had made the whole round earth, and the turtle continues to hold the earth on its back.

Implications and consequences

There are immense contemporary political implications

- There is still considerable residual guilt over the manner in which the Western Hemisphere was invaded and settled by Europeans through five centuries of brutality.
 - If we migrated from another place, then we are also immigrants to the western hemisphere and our aboriginal claim to these lands is invalid and therefore diminished.
 - A “superior” and “more civilized” group had a right to take over these lands.
- Archeologists argue that the Bering Strait land bridge theory proves we all have the same common ancestors and are all related. Therefore, Euro-American researchers have the right to exhume, study, and hold Indian remains and sacred burial objects in perpetuity in the name of science. Only eleven states have laws that protect unmarked Indian burial sites. In Texas, where 98% of the lands are privately owned, federal law only protects that 2% of public land. There is no state law protecting Indian remains and burial and sacred objects in burial sites in the remaining 98% of private lands. It is illegal to disturb and rob from a grave, but not from an Indian burial site on private land.
- Indians are also subjected to the old “If you don’t like it, why don’t you just go back to where you came from” as former U.S. Senator and Indians Claims Commissioner Arthur Watkins told a group of Indians in California in the 1960’s when they protested against a ruling that the California claims would be consolidated into one complaint, instead of allowing the individual tribal groups to file specific claims for their lands.

Myth: The new world that Columbus found was a thinly peopled paradise of plants, animals, and hunter-gathers with no civilization.

Traditionally, Americans learned in school that the natives encountered by the first Europeans existed mainly in small, nomadic bands; and that the Americas was, for all practical purposes, still a vast wilderness. The people, savage and uncivilized, needed to be tamed, Christianized and civilized. The land, wild and undeveloped, needed to be tamed and owned.

Realities

- In 1491, there were probably more people living in the Americas than in Europe, and these people were about one fifth of the total world population.
- Certain cities, such as Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, were far greater than any contemporary European city.
- Tenochtitlan, unlike any capital in Europe at that time, had running water, beautiful botanical gardens, and immaculately clean streets.
- The earliest cities in the Western Hemisphere were thriving before the Egyptians built the great pyramids.
- There were multi-storied dwellings built by some of the Indians in the American Southwest. One four-tiered complex covered such a large area that it remained the largest apartment complex in North America until the nineteenth century.
- Agriculture arose independently in four areas of the world, two of them in the Western hemisphere around 8000-7000 B.C.
 - American Indians in South and Central America invented one of the most productive methods of farming ever to be devised when they began building artificial islands called *chinampas* (a form of raised-bed) in swamplands and lakes as early as 4,000 years ago.

- This practice of *chinampas* also led to the development of aquaculture, the practice of raising crops in water instead of soil. One of the amazing feats of the Aztec *chinampa* farmers was to turn saltwater into freshwater by building an enormous dike that separated salty water from the biggest lake.
- American Indians of South America, Mesoamerican, and the North American Southwest used terraced farming to grow crops on hillsides, steep slopes of protected valleys to make the most effective use of land and water in order to maximize crop yields.
- Indians in México had already developed corn by a breeding process so sophisticated that the journal *Science* described it as “man’s first and perhaps the greatest, feat of genetic engineering.”
- Indigenous surgeons in South American, Mesoamerica, and North American were executing delicate and complex medical procedures.
 - Operations and using anesthetics and antibiotics medications, two practices that were not used in Europe at that time. They also practiced asepsis, creating what is known today as a “sterile field” for surgeries.
 - Indians in Peru preformed *Trepanation*, a form of brain surgery in about 1000 B.C. This procedure involved drilling a hole into the skull, then covering the resulting opening with specially made plates.
 - American Indians in North America, Mesoamerica and South America practiced orthopedic surgery, such as reducing or setting bone fractures, breaks, and dislocations, long before the Europeans.
- The Olmecs in Mexico produced a Solar Fire Starter that utilized optics to concentrate reflected sunlight in 1700 B. C. An even more fascinating aspect of this device was its capacity to project images onto another surface several feet away.
- Indigenous peoples throughout the pre-contact Americas used writing systems called pictograms to record and write information with varying degrees of sophistication.
 - These writing systems ranged from the simple petroglyphs of ancient North American Paleo-Indians
 - to the complex written language of the Maya that was capable of recording anything spoken in the Maya language.
 - Mesoamerican cultures compiled their writing into books well before the Europeans reached the Americas. They included the Maya, the Toltec, the Mixtec, and the Aztec. Because the books that existed at the time of the Spanish conquest threatened the Spaniards’ rule by keeping indigenous culture alive, they ordered these books destroyed shortly after seizing power.
- The most extraordinary and amazing invention of pre-contact American Indians was producing electricity through chemical means. The Moche, from what is now Peru, invented the electrochemical production of electricity by using water and chemicals that they found naturally occurring in their environment. The Moche, who used this process for electroplating and silver plating preceded the Europeans in developing electroplating by more than a thousand years.
- Using zero was the basis of several mathematical functions.
 - Mesoamerican scholars believe that the Olmec were using the zero, the basis for several mathematical functions such as division and fractions, as early as 31 B.C.
 - Pre-Inca, Inca, and other indigenous culture groups in South American employed quipus, an accounting and communication system that uses knotted strings to record, transmit and retrieve information based on the principle of “zero”.
- One of the most significant influences on the United States Constitution was the Iroquois Constitution, also called the Great Law of Peace created by the Iroquois to stop neighboring tribes from fighting. It was created between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1400 and formed a confederacy among the Iroquois tribes: the Oneida, Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, and the Seneca, and later the Tuscarora.

Implications and consequences

- If the Western Hemisphere was a vacant, unexploited, fertile land waiting to be put under cultivation according to God's holy dictates through Manifest Destiny, then the whole hemisphere belonged to whoever was able to rescue it from its wilderness state.
- If the original inhabitants were primitive, uncivilized, blood-thirsty savages, then they were inferior to the later newcomers.
- Indians do not deserve equal benefits as the rest of the population.
- The countless contributions of the Indians are not recognized.
 - This contributes to negative images and feeling towards Indians by non-Indians and Indians themselves.
 - Indians do not receive positive images to reinforce the value of their culture and identity.
 - The Natives' world was irretrievably shattered--biologically, militarily, socially, culturally, politically and spiritually.

Myth: The Aztecs practiced human sacrifice.

Books written about the Mexica (Aztecs) usually waste no time in describing the genocidal acts of mass human sacrifice. In fact, the story has been repeated so often that it has been accepted as common knowledge. Later chronicles by Spanish writers, missionaries, and even Indian converts and present day Hispanic writers have told repeatedly of this cult practicing human sacrifice. Cutting out the victim's heart with an obsidian knife (fashioned from volcanic glass) was supposedly the most common method of sacrifice. Other forms such as beheading, piercing with spears or arrows, and setting victims against each other in duels, were supposedly practiced as well. We have even been told that some victims were literally skinned alive, a high priest then donning this "skin suit" to perform a ritual dance.

Hernan Cortez, himself was the inventor of this legend of ritual murder. In 1522, Cortez wrote a letter to the king of Spain, Charles V, describing an alleged sacrifice of Spanish soldiers shortly after a Mexica victory. Cortez claimed that he and his men observed these sacrifices from Tlacopan, while they took place on the main temple in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. A very detailed account of this same event was given by Bernal Diaz del Castillo in his "The True History of the Conquest of New Spain." This feat of observation would have been physically impossible, as the Spaniards were separated from Tenochtitlan by over three miles of water and would have to have been inside the temple grounds.

Realities

- All the historical references to Aztec sacrifices derive from the Christian conquerors.
- With the exception of Hernan Cortez and Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who described a sacrifice in great gory detail from over three miles away, there are virtually no eye-witness accounts
- All other original accounts of Aztec or Maya sacrifices derive from Inquisition sources, for example the notorious Diego de Landa that was from testimony given under torture.
- No massive catacombs with what would have been the bones of sacrifice victims have ever been found in Mesoamerica.
- Among the remains which supposedly "prove" human sacrifice are the human skulls which were mounted on the infamous "skull racks" in the main plazas. The Aztecs had very strict laws, and anyone caught stealing, abusing alcohol, or committing adultery would be put to death and the skulls of these people were cleaned and placed on public display as a reminder of the consequences for breaking the law.
- Another "proof" offered are the skulls which were decorated with flint stones jutting out from the nasal cavity and mouth. In Aztec culture, the flint stone represents a cutting ray of knowledge; so metaphorically, it is most likely that these skulls belonged to the teachers, elders, and leaders.
- Many archaeological finds like sculptures, frescoes, wall paintings and pictographs declared to be connected to human sacrifice are in no way proof that humans were in fact sacrificed.

- There are many possible interpretations of the images of hearts and even killings in these artifacts. They could depict myths or legends. They could also represent narrative images such as allegories, symbols, and or metaphors. The same way that Christians use consecrated wine and bread waffles to symbolize the act of eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ during their religious (services) ceremonies.
- Another important symbolic background for images of killing in Aztec artifacts is the initiation ceremony, whose central event is the mystical death. The candidate has to “die” in order to be “reborn.”
- It would be naïve to claim that every depiction of death seen in Aztec artwork is actually a metaphorical expression. Some of these images must represent actual deaths taking place such as depictions of people being put to death or depictions of murder being committed. But this does not mean that these deaths have to be “human sacrifice”.
- The ritual of “human skinning” where we see the skin removed quickly from the victim, with a single cut along the spine, and coming off the body in a single piece is scarcely practicable or humanly possible.
- It may be possible, but not too practical to cut open the chest of a victim with a stone knife wide enough to tear his heart out without the use of a saw and a rib spreader, tools that were apparently never archaeologically present.
- According to scholarly experts of Nahuatl, the Aztec language, numerous words were used to describe the various sorts of animal sacrifice and fruit offerings, but there is no word referring to human sacrifice.
- The Nahuatl word “tlacamictilizli” which according to the Spanish monk and interpreter Fray Alonso de Molina referred to human sacrifice, simply means “man killing” and was the same word used to describe murder or any other homicide.

Implications and consequences

- Present day descendents of these Indians and of all Indians are sub-human since ancient Indians practiced human sacrifice. If you are sub-human, you are not entitled to human rights:
 - The Bill of Rights under the U.S. Constitution has not applied to the original inhabitants of these lands.
 - All our spiritual ceremonies were outlawed until some of them were allowed when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed in 1978.
- When you de-humanize a group, and discredit part of their belief system, you also discredit their total culture and all their belief system.
- This de-humanization caused many Mexicans and Mexican Americans to believe that the farther they distance themselves from an indigenous identity, the better off they will be and start calling themselves mestizo, Hispanic, Latino.

Myth: Since initial contact, the Spanish Conquistadores starting intermarrying with the native indigenous people and produced the Mestizo whose descendents are the present day Hispanics and Latinos.

An analysis of history will help to understand the social/political/spiritual/environmental relationships between the Spanish and the Indian after initial contact. Each Spanish military campaign tells a different history of their particular defeat of the native population. All provided some variations, but of the same theme. A conquistador would appear with horses, and cannon. The local leaders would be burned alive or hanged. The people would then be enslaved. It made no difference whether the Spaniards came upon stone-age tribes, as in some remote wildernesses of the Caribbean islands, or upon simple rural societies, as in the West Indies, or upon a highly organized state, as in Peru, or upon a priestly autocracy, as in Mexico. The Spaniards set out to either kill or enslave virtually the entire population. All of this has been documented through the meticulous records kept by the Spaniards and their stream of reports that went out to the court in Spain. The Spaniards set out to destroy

the natives' religious temples of worship, their language, history, customs and values, in fact, all of their culture.

As Chicanos/Mexicanos, we claim a mixed cultural heritage called “mestizaje”, the mixing of European Spaniards and Indians. This myth that we are a Mestizo race of half Spaniard and half Native American heritage has been propagated over the past 500 years despite thunderous evidence to the contrary. The two primary reasons for the continuation of this myth are: 1) the unique colonization process used by the Spaniards, and 2) the Indian extermination and removal policies of Texas and the rest of the United States. The Spaniards started to wipe out the indigenous identity by Christianizing the Native Americans they brought into the missions, giving them Spanish names, and bringing them into the colonial society by making them Spanish subjects. This systematic removal of their traditional ceremonies, language, lineage, and way of living, forced Native Americans to become underclass citizens in a Spanish society subservient to a European ruling class.

By 1800, these indigenous, previously-Spanish subjects (and still pure blooded Indians) were known as Tejanos, Nuevo Mexicanos, Californianos or Mexicanos who had become “gente de razón,” and were an integral part of the greater society. So when Texas and the rest of the nation started exterminating or removing Native Americans to Indian Territory, these colonized Indians declared that they were “Mexican” (not Indian) for the sake of survival. Over the years, the need to suppress the Indian identity here in the United States remained a survival imperative until eventually we even forgot why we kept our Indian heritage a secret. Parents made it a point never to mention to their children that they were Indian, and instead instilled in them the pride of being Mexican, a nationalistic identity – not a racially-based identity

Realities

- Insufficient number of Spaniards to create a significant, present-day Mestizo race.
 - While it is undeniable that some Mexicans are mestizos, recent DNA studies show that a large majority of present-day Chicanos/Hispanics/Latinos are almost 100% indigenous (Native American race) with little or no European blood.
 - Only 900 Spaniards accompanied Hernan Cortez in 1521 when he conquered the Mexica in a time when it has been estimated that the overall native population of Mexico was over 30 million. Simply put, though rape or consensual, 900 Spaniards were insufficient to alter the racial make up of the entire native population.
 - Despite European and African migration into Mexico during the colonial period, indigenous people continued to greatly outnumber the non-native and small number of mestizo populations combined.
- De-Indianization and Mestizaje
 - Mestizaje is a Eurocentric concept advocating Westernization of native people in exchange for their ethnocide.
 - Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has defined “De-Indianization” as a historical process through which populations that originally possessed a particular and distinctive identity, based upon their own culture, are forced to renounce that identity with all the consequent changes in their social organization and culture. Batalla believes that in Mexico, the Spanish colonizers were “able to convince the colonized of their own inferiority,” and once the population stopped considering itself Indian, then the de-Indianization process was complete. Because these de-Indianized Indians could never truly be considered Europeans, they were therefore “Mestizos” instead.
 - The concept of mestizaje is rooted in the idea that Mexicans are half-breeds, illegitimate children not fully Indian and not fully European. In the eighteenth century, the Mexican-born Spanish descendants who comprised the ruling elite co-opted mestizaje as an ideology to help fuel their movement for independence from Spain. By the turn of the nineteenth century, mestizaje was sufficiently forged into a national Mexican identity.

- There is no evidence of prolific intermarrying between the two races; in fact the distinct and deliberate separation of the races has been practiced in both Mexico and the U.S. until the late twentieth century.
 - The first and few Mestizos, and there were some Mestizos, resulted from the raping of Indian women slaves.
 - Spanish documents reflect that Indian women were known to abort Spanish-sired babies or commit suicide to avoid the dishonor of having offspring from the despised Spaniards.
- Racial mixture was reviled in sixteenth century New Spain. Mixing with native people was deemed disgraceful by the conquistadors who prided themselves for their “limpieza de sangre” (purity of blood).
- The glaring physical and cultural differences that still exist in Mexico between those who rule (the light-skinned ruling elite proud of their European lineage) and those who are ruled (the dark-skinned Mexican Indian lower classes) is an indication that racial mixing between Indians and Europeans was and still is less than common than widely believed.
- Some Indians consciously chose to maintain as much of their culture as possible with some Indians even flaunting their Indian-ness. All through time, some descendents of these Indians have been going through several movements of resistance to assimilation to the Spanish, to the Mexican and then the Anglo influences. The “Pachuco” and the “Chicano” are just two examples of these resistances.

Implications and consequences

- Defenders of mestizaje say that Mexican identity is mixed and layered and that the Spanish presence in both blood and culture cannot be denied, and therefore must be embraced.
 - It overlooks the brutal crimes and atrocities committed by the Europeans, including murder, rape, slavery, plunder of natural resources, ethnocide, and genocide, and forces Chicanos/Mexicanos to abandon any claims for justice for these atrocities.
- In spite of the conquest being extremely cruel and destructive, many of the Indian victims identified with their conqueror and oppressor, much like the phenomena of kidnapped victims who start identifying with their kidnappers.
 - The tendency of the Spaniard to treat the Indian as inferior and less than human resulted in some Indians going into denial or claiming they were part-Spanish (Mestizos).
 - Perhaps no other ethnic group is as self-conscious and irresolute about its self-worth than the Mexican people who reproach their identity and characterize themselves in a self-abasing tone as the “hijos de la chingada” – fruits of the violation of Indian women by Europeans.
- In the Mexicano/Hispanic reality, “European-ness/whiteness” continues to be synonymous with beauty and social and economic opportunity. “Indian-ness” is equated with ugliness, backwardness, inferiority, and poverty.
 - This de-Indianization process of shedding one’s indigenous identity is linked with the desire to improve one’s social-economic condition since Indian people still remain the poorest and most subjugated group in Mexico.
- This de-Indianization even continues today as an increasing number of Mexican Americans prefer to identify as “Latino” or “Hispanic,” Eurocentric labels that totally ignore our indigenous heritage.
 - The majority of the people in Mexico and the largest ethnic minority in the United States have been denied their rightful identity, culture, heritage and spirituality.

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