

**Scientific Dogma or Indigenous Geographic Knowledge:  
Was America a Land Without History Prior to European Contact?**

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*[C]aution should be exercised in comparing or contrasting religious movements among civilized peoples with [Indian] fantasies...; for... red men and white men are separated by a chasm so broad and so deep that few representatives of either race are ever able clearly to see its further sides...*

Bureau of American Ethnology, 1896 (quoted in Hittman 1997:26)

*I personally feel that unless and until we are in some way connected with world history as early peoples, perhaps even as refugees from Old World turmoils and persecutions, we will never be accorded full humanity. We cannot be primitive peoples who were suddenly discovered half a millennium ago.*

Vine Deloria Jr. (1991:597)

The old representations of indigenous people in the canons of academic knowledge have shaped the understandings of the general public, both native and white. A generation of college anthropology courses has created an uncomplicated view of the peopling of the Americas, which approaches scientific dogma. The canonical view is that American Indian cultures developed in isolation from a small group of late Upper Paleolithic hunters.

Defenders of this status quo argue that the cultural achievements of Native Americans are entirely independent of Old World cultures. Dissenters argue that the status quo denies a connection between American prehistory and world history, and minimizes Native America's connection to humanity as a whole. Accusations of Eurocentrism and racism are leveled on both sides of this debate. In the eyes of the status quo, the maritime exchange of culture and technology denies the uniqueness of New World peoples; in the eyes of the dissenters it supports their kinship to Old World peoples. Were the American Indians a people without history? Is there any common ground between the different scholarly camps?

My paper will discuss a range of possible interpretations of traditional geographic knowledge within the Athabaskan family, painting a complicated picture of this debate and the political ramifications of oral history and scholarship.

### **Diffusion and the Peopling of the New World**

A spiritual and cultural chasm between the descendants of the natives of the Old World and the New World remains strong 500 years after Columbus. Though both cultures recognized this chasm immediately, many Indians at first sought reconciliation with their "long lost brothers," even as they were branded an inferior race by the newcomers (Georgakas 1973:x). Though Western science no longer asserts the inferiority

of the red "race," the colonizers still today "have a privileged point of view" over the colonized (Spurr 1993:14-15), and academic canons continue to maintain the broad and deep chasm between New World prehistory and Old World history. Most scholars would reject the old hierarchy of cultures on a scale from "primitive" to "civilized," yet the general public still largely assumes the cultural inferiority of peoples outside of history. The orthodox anthropological view does not refute this image. The traditional "scientific" assumption is that all Native Americans are the descendents of wandering bands of Paleolithic Siberian hunter-gatherers, who followed herds of game over the Bering Land Bridge. A number of scholars and Indian activists have embraced these "isolationist" views, because they support the cultural independence of Native Americans and Pan-Indian solidarity through the assertion of a single Paleo-Asiatic origin (Deloria 1991:597).

The "diffusionist" perspective, in contrast with the above, suggests that long-range contacts and the exchange of ideas and technologies between continents is a plausible explanation for the development of societies and cultures along parallel lines, and that the Americas, like other continents, were populated by different groups over a long period of time. Vine Deloria Jr. is one scholar and Indian activist who has been able to "see the further sides of the chasm," to connect Old World and New World cultures (see opening quote). He challenges archaeologists to look at "all possible theories of Precolombian contact and even the transmission of every cultural trait that is found elsewhere." He argues that the Bering Land Bridge is a fictional doctrine, which defines Native Americans as "freaks outside of historic time" (Deloria 1991:597). In this view he is outspoken among scholars, and among some of his close friends in the Indian activist community.

It is ironic that this canonical doctrine of 20th-century anthropology, and the source of what I term "monocultural indigenism," is rooted in the politically motivated scholarship of a 16th-century priest, José de Acosta (Gemegah 2001:4). Acosta suggested that Indians were primitive Asians who walked to America over a land bridge long ago, and that by extension the Spanish conquest of America was a step towards the eventual Spanish conquest of China. This land bridge migration scenario was embraced by Ales Hrdlička, an influential early 20th-century physical anthropologist, who gave this political and geographic tradition an air of legitimacy which remains to this day. Helga Gemegah has called the Beringian migration model the "Acosta-Hrdlička Dogma" (*ibid.*).

While many educated Americans believe in this dogma and take for granted an immense gulf between Native Americans and other world cultures, one new American religion, the Church of the Latter Day Saints, has long held a diffusionist position. They claim that Native Americans are a "People of the Book," that is to say that they are the descendents of Middle-Eastern civilizations. In popular Mormon culture, it is believed that American Indians are mostly (if not entirely) descended from members of the scattered Lost Tribes of Israel (see the "Forward" to the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon). The suggestion of a single root culture for an entire continent is problematic, whether that culture is Hebrew or Siberian. To be fair, Mormon scholars may acknowledge the multicultural origins of Native Americans. Still, the history of the

association of Mormonism and diffusionist scholarship has left a general suspicion of diffusionism within the scientific mainstream, and archaeologists with even distant ties to this church face severe criticism from the academic establishment for this reason alone (Stengel 2000:44).

Xenophobic nationalist rhetoric is founded on the notion of racially pure cultures, and any position that argues for a single cultural origin of an entire continent is suspect in my view, whether argued from scientific or religious ground. Race is a social construct that may be strategically employed for good or ill, but races are not essential biological categories. Religious studies and the human sciences may alternatively demonstrate historical connections between diverse cultures separated by the world's great oceans.

The debate between diffusionists and establishment scholars has involved accusations of racism and Eurocentrism from both sides. Representatives of either group might say, "it is racist to argue that Indians could not have discovered it on their own." For an establishment scholar, "it" could refer to the independent development in the Americas of something already present in the Old World, such as writing, agriculture or the bow and arrow. For a diffusionist scholar, "it" could be geographic knowledge of the relationship of the Americas to the other regions of the world. This simplistic binary opposition illustrates a point about the uncivil tone of the debate, but it is a point that should not be overplayed. A postcolonial viewpoint recognizes that to bestow credit for any human achievement upon one ancient race is to remain trapped in the colonial mindset, in which self-worth depends on the achievements of one's ancestors. Undoubtedly, many great discoveries were made in Pre-Columbian America. But ancient discoveries are the property of all nations! While "Prometheus" is in one sense a Greek figure, the one who captured fire was first and foremost a citizen of Earth, and she has given the flame to all her tribes. So it was with inventors of agriculture, writing, metallurgy, etc.

Inventions were made in discreet areas, and the nations of the world recognized their utility, so they spread. Native Europeans did not invent agriculture, archery, trousers, or metallurgy, etc., but they were part of a vast cultural network that allowed them to adopt useful techniques from Asia and the Middle East. It is not racist to say that Native Americans were also the recipients of the world's knowledge and traditions. It is not Eurocentric to suggest that America and Europe shared knowledge from other lands.

To deny the legitimacy of indigenous geographic and historical knowledge is more insidious than the suggestion that ancient peoples may have adopted foreign technologies. Where indigenous traditions describe ancient journeys and visitors to and from other continents, anthropological tradition would dismiss these as myths or fantasies. These stories describe the origins of cultures and define their relationship to the land. The legends often have religious or mythological overtones with multiple interpretations, blurring the lines between oral history and myth. Yet ancient epic stories loom large in world history, and they were preserved only in songs for generations before they were written down. Archaeology has verified the existence of Homer's Troy and the epic accounts of Viking settlement of the New World. Nevertheless, the academy is

reluctant to consider Native American stories of great migrations, which could indicate relationships between the Americas and world cultures. By claiming that Natives were ignorant of their place in the world, the colonizers have denied them equal footing on it.

Languages and traditions shared by folks on different sides of the earth should contribute to the realization that the world shares one history. Several Athabaskan (Dene) tribes have origin traditions that refer explicitly to an Old World, but Northern Athabaskans and Southern Athabaskans interpret these traditions differently.

### **A Journey to North America from Asia, in Native American Origin Traditions**

As an undergraduate in a Native American Studies class at Kent State University in 1999, I had the honor to meet a distinguished guest lecturer, Lidscha Arbakow, a Vietnam veteran, and a Ph.D. Candidate in Urban Planning at Cleveland State University. He is one of a handful of living speakers of his Athabaskan language. The U.S. government does not recognize his small Alaskan tribe, but his people are close kin to the Navajo and Apache peoples who migrated to the Southwest. When I asked him about his people's origins, he surprised me with his forthrightness. "My ancestors sailed across the Bering Sea from Asia" he said. This was not the answer I expected from a traditional Indian (traditional Navajos often claim that the act of humanity's creation took place in the New World). But Lidscha's oral tradition of transoceanic migration is indeed representative of a larger body of indigenous geographic knowledge among Northern Athabaskan peoples, noted by Emile Petitot in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "the facts of which their traditions tell, took place on the other side of the earth, where their former country was situated in a long distant past" (1889: 137-138).

It has been noted that a small minority of Southern Athabaskans may have preserved this indigenous geographic knowledge. Anthropologist Chien Chiao surveyed several hundred Navajo schoolchildren, asking them to indicate whether they supported Navajo "creationism" (which holds that the people emerged from a lower world), or alternatively the "scientific" theory of Asian origins. About 4% of the surveyed group claimed that the question was flawed, because the two questions were not mutually exclusive. As Chien Chiao concludes, "when Navajo said that their ancestors came from the lower world, they meant that their ancestors came from the other side of the world, i.e., Asia" (1971: 89).

This small group indicates that Northern Athabaskan and Southern Athabaskan origin traditions may be reconciled, when the concepts of migration and emergence are joined. The Navajo claim that the people emerged from an old world through an immense deluge, protected inside a giant straw (Gold 1994:39). Some of their northern relatives claim to have sailed across a vast ocean from the other side of the earth, inside of a boat caulked with giant straw (bamboo caulking was common in Asian ships) (Stewart 1991:364). I have come to believe that the Northern and Southern Athabaskan origin traditions both refer to the same historical events. Northern and Southern Athabaskan lore recalls an ancient "time of monsters" and a supreme Giant Monster, who was

miraculously slain by the savior(s) of humankind. One diffusionist scholar has even suggested that this monster was the quintessential world-conqueror Genghis Khan, fatally wounded during the Conquest of Xi-Xia, in A.D. 1227. I do not lightly dismiss this claim, amazing though it sounds.

Historian Ethel Stewart has suggested that the three major branches of the Na-Dene were escaped fugitives of the Mongols, who fought bravely against Genghis Khan in Central Asia. In her view, the Athabaskan/Eyak branch was comprised of the multi-ethnic armies of the Sino-Tibetan border kingdom of Xi-Xia (a rebellious vassal state), called *A-lha-bskyang* ("Protected by the Lord") in the Xia-Tibetan language. The Tlingit and Haida branches were possibly Altaic Telingit and the Hie-Ta (Black Tartars), from north of the Gobi Desert, allies of Xi-Xia by the year A.D. 1227 (Stewart 1991: 378, 478-479; see Dunnell 1996:xxv). Elsewhere I have argued that Stewart's hypothesis may help to illuminate North American proto-history, providing alternative paths for collaboration between religion scholars, linguists, and anthropologists (Wilson 2004). My goal is to bring together different strains of thought, and to advocate an ecumenical and interdisciplinary dialog between different groups of scholars and the representatives of traditional cultures and religions.

### **A Brief Summary of Evidence Connecting Athabaskans to Central Asia**

A substantial body of linguistic, religious, material and genetic evidence exists to suggest maritime contacts between the peoples of Asia and North America. The similarity between Athabaskan and Tibetan speech is so close that in 1921 the linguist Edward Sapir joined the two families under one super-family, known as Sino-Dene (Golla 1984; Sapir 1991). More recently, Athabaskanist Jeff Leer has suggested that the Athabaskan language family is a Tibeto-Burmic sub-group (Behr 2003:176; Leer 1999). Athabaskan has also been compared to the Caucasian and Yeniseian languages of Central Asia, hinting at more complex interfamilial relationships (Shevoroshkin 1991; Ruhlen 1998). The Turks have assimilated many Caucasian groups, and the Huns may have included Yeniseian Tribes; both were present in the Sino-Tibetan border kingdoms in the years prior to the Mongol invasions (Schuhmacher & Seto 1993:345; Vovin 2000).

Complex religious ideas unite these groups as well. Deity names, specific features of the shamanism complex, and highly complex ritual scripts are shared between Central Asia and Athabaskan North America (Gold 1994:194; Dzeniskevich 1994:53-54; Fitzhugh 1994:36-41). It must be emphasized that these ideas and practices are not limited to those prehistoric in origin (very little is known about Paleolithic religion), but include most prominently those which are Buddhist and Taoist in origin. The North Pacific fur-trade route is a likely source of the more recent Asiatic influences in the New World (Fitzhugh 1994:36-41). Finally, the manifold similarities of Navajo and Tibetan Buddhist sand-paintings are unlikely coincidences, paralleled by linguistic evidence (Chiao 1982:25). Though Navajo sand-mandalas are traditionally attributed to a Southwestern-Pueblo source, the numerous similar features of Tibetan sand-mandalas provide grounds to suggest that the Navajo brought a fully developed ceremonial template with them when they arrived in the Southwest, and have since adopted only certain elements from the Pueblos. The position of several specific deities within the

Navajo sacred universe corresponds exactly to the position of several specific Buddhist deities; for example, the Buddhist Diamond Beings and the Navajo Rock-Crystal People all reside in the eastern quadrant of their respective sacred geographic templates (Wilson 2004).

Material and biological evidence abounds. It has long been suspected that the Athabaskans introduced the compound bow and the hard-soled shoe from Asia, which gave them a distinct advantage in hunting and warfare (Downs 1972:6). Genetic evidence indicates that Central Asians are more closely related to Athabaskans than northern and southern Chinese populations are to each other (Torroni et al. 1994:196). Finally, although the European diseases in the Americas were significant (and their human toll should never be downplayed), it is now becoming clear that some Old World diseases were present in America for centuries prior to Columbus, and a few have been linked to nomads like the Athabaskans (Wilford 2002:D6). All of these factors have compelled me to consider claims for historical diffusion in Athabaskan America.

### **Conclusion: Challenges and Potentials**

Many Southern Athabaskans (Navajo and Apache) would take issue with these claims, because their creation stories strongly connect their sense of identity to their current homelands. To suggest that events in the previous world, or in the “time of monsters,” took place in historical Asia is especially challenging to textbook notions of Indian identity. The suggestion of multicultural origins may threaten Pan-Indian nationalist identity linked to a single common ancestor. The suggestion that a native language is a recent arrival on the continent may threaten tribal nationalist identities, where different tribes have competing claims for the same land, based on the antiquity of their occupation. It is not my intention to challenge Athabaskan land claims, or to deny that Athabaskans are indigenous peoples. Neither do I claim objectivity (this research is my passion). As an Anglo-American scholar, I am no great authority in Native American Studies. I cannot deny my cultural position as a descendent of the colonizers. While I am sympathetic to indigenous perspectives, I do not claim to represent anyone else.

I humbly suggest a new path in postcolonial historiography, in which the Americas are seen as an integrated part of the ancient world, and the established Americanist theories of prehistory are questioned. Though some notions of American Indian identity will be challenged, others are newly legitimated. If Athabaskans originated in Central Asia, then many important features of Navajo and Apache culture are indigenous to the Athabaskans, and not borrowed from Pueblos and Europeans, as anthropologists have argued. Central Asian peoples transmitted Buddhism to China, invented trousers and boots with heels, domesticated the horse, and have been master pastoral herdsmen and shepherds for ages (Puri 1987:1, 5, 94-98). If Ethel Stewart is correct, then the ancestral Athabaskans were wearing long pants and riding horses for centuries, when Western Europeans were still wearing loincloths. The realization of the extent and accuracy of indigenous geographic knowledge during antiquity may help to displace the Eurocentric colonialist worldview, still deeply entrenched in the academy.

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