Native Americans

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Article begins on next page
Native Americans

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term Native American refers to a member of any native Indian peoples of North America. An alternative term for Native American is American Indian. The U.S. Census Bureau’s category “American Indian or Alaska Native” refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment. In the 2000 census 4.3 million reported their race as American Indian or Alaska Native, with 2.4 million reporting this as their only race. The Bureau of Indian Affairs reports that there are 564 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages. Besides these federally recognized tribes, there are also state recognized tribes and tribes that have not petitioned for federal recognition. The number of tribes and communities that individuals affiliate with is large and diverse. This article will explore in general the historical and social networks of native peoples who maintain tribal affiliations and community attachments rather than attempt to look at specific populations within the larger group.

Native Americans have communicated, organized and socialized using a variety of social networks, from physical lodges to societies to social networking websites. The social networks of Native Americans are as diverse as the population, providing connections and communications within tribes, regions and nations as well as among these groups and with other populations. Native American cultures emphasize oral
traditions and kinship, and this is evident in many of the social networks. As a minority
group that continues to strive for recognition and respect, Native Americans have used,
and continue to use social networks for activism, public relations and to support one in
another in their causes.

The social and kinship systems of Native Americans have been observed,
documented and explored since anthropologists began studying Native American
cultures. American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, an early observer of Native
American kinship systems spent time with the Iroquois during the 1840’s and went on to
discover differences and similarities between the Iroquois kinship system and those of
other Native Americans in North America. He conducted a comparative study of North
American kinship, creating the first typology of kinship systems and establishing kinship
as an important part of the study of social structures and social evolution and thus an
important part of the study of social networks.

Far before Morgan established the study of kinship as important to the academic
observation and analysis of societies, Native America embraced deep bonds and strong
communication among both blood and tribal relations. These bonds and communication
continue to make up the kinship systems of Native America, representing both past and
present social networks. The concepts of community and family are extremely important
to Native Americans as ways to link an individual to their past, present and future. These
links are created through various social networks within families, clans, tribes and other
social groups.

Native American social networks have historically expanded beyond bloodlines
and clan affiliation through non-kinship based societies. These societies provide
individuals with a sense of identity outside their kinship groups as well as social connections to an expanded community. Examples of non-kinship based societies include Medicine Societies, Warrior Societies, Ceremonial and Secret Societies and Spiritual Societies. A major function of all of these different societies was to provide members with a connection through ritual, ceremony and celebration. This celebration of ritual and ceremony whether within societies, tribes or other groups has always been an important part of Native American culture and its social networks. One of the most well-known gatherings of ritual, community and celebration is the powwow. Powwows are as diverse and unique as the tribes and communities. From large national powwows in arenas to small community powwows in gymnasiums, these gatherings of community and celebration of culture take place throughout Native America.

The social networks that are part of these powwows range from a group of local dancers to a larger virtual society. The social networking that takes place at powwows has moved beyond the physical location of dancing, singing and celebration to include a virtual audience with virtual participation. The website PowWows.com was established in 1996 in order to share information about powwows among participants and audiences. At present this website not only provides a calendar and information on powwows, but it also includes a variety of social networking tools such as forums, blog, groups and a Twitter account. This site provides access to music, radio, webcasts and video, which along with the community aspects of the site enhance the virtual powwow experience.

PowWows.com is just one website in the Pow Wow Network (powwownetwork.com). This network includes eight sites focused on Native Americans. Many of these sites include community areas with tools for social networking. The site
MyTribalSpace.com is a social networking site similar to that of the mainstream social networking sites MySpace and Facebook where members can create a profile, connect with friends, share information and take part in discussions. Besides the Pow Wow Network of websites, there are many sites focused on bringing together communities of Native Americans and other native peoples and also dedicated to enhancing the lines of communication between native and non-native peoples. One such site is MyResSpace.com which is an “Indigenous North American Blog reporting the news from an aboriginal perspective”. This site aggregates information from other sites to provide easy access to other Native American blogs, Native American news, information on tribes, culture and Native American made YouTube content. The YouTube content includes examples of singing, dancing, music and storytelling. The blog format allows for readers to comment and take part in conversations. Another example of a community website is NativeWeb.org, which reaches beyond the communities of Native Americans and is intended as a virtual place for all indigenous cultures of the world to connect and communicate. These are just two examples of the many sites providing virtual social networking for Native Americans and those interested in Native American culture. There are many more examples of communities and social networks each with their own unique focus and perspective.

A key element to any social network is the method of communication among those who make up the network. While often badly stereotyped in American media and entertainment, sign language did serve as an important form of communication for Native Americans. The ability to communicate beyond one’s own local community enhanced social networks and provided tribes further strength in representation. As a minority
group, Native Americans have historically collaborated and communicated in order to educate non-natives, represent themselves as a group strongly and accurately and seek to diminish stereotypes of the culture. This is being done through the internet communities previously described as well as through other forms of media that include radio, television, newspapers and magazines. All of these serve as social networks for Native America. There are examples of tribal, state, provincial, regional, and national media that include newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television corporations that have been providing information, communication and support for Native American communities.

There are also examples of organizations that were formed in order to create networks for Native Americans to promote activism and increase recognition of Native American culture. The Society of American Indians (SAI) was founded in 1911 in order to mark a rediscovery of native identity and pride. Comprised of native members and non-native associates, the SAI sought to emphasize the historical, legal and cultural bonds of all Native Americans, working towards educational and social advancements, true historical representation, native citizenship and legal assistance. The SAI attempted to provide a network for individuals and organizations to communicate and collaborate on pan-Indian reforms. Similar to academic societies and networks of the time, the SAI held annual conferences and published a quarterly magazine, which included news announcements, conference proceedings and articles. The Society dissolved in 1924 shortly after the signing of the Indian Citizenship Bill due in part to disagreements among members and differing political and individual interests instigated by the events of World War I. While the SAI ceased to exist, the continued causes and need for a network of Native American advocates did not. Another example of a network created for purposes
of advocacy is the American Indian Movement, or AIM as it is better known. As an activist organization, this network has organized events that have included taking over the Bureau of American Indian Affairs building in Washington, D.C, a standoff at Wounded Knee, various marches to advocate Native American causes and protests at sporting events with teams with racist mascot names such as Braves, Chiefs, Warriors, Blackhawks, Redskins and the very controversial Cleveland Indians mascot, Chief Wahoo. Founded in late sixties during times of great social change in the United States, this organization has not been without controversy surrounding its events and actions. This network continues to serve the Native American community through dissemination of information, organization of events and activism and advocacy. A current media project provides access to news, information, music and more through a series of webcasts available on the official website.

The rise of the internet and virtual communication has enhanced that which was already present in Native American cultures, strong social networks. Close bonds between family, groups, clans, tribes and other native people have always been a dominant part of Native American culture. The need to promote cultural understanding and actively represent themselves in the larger population has always been an important aspect of these social networks. The social networking tools of today have expanded the range and broadened the audience beyond that of the traditional communities and groups. This expansion has provided unique opportunities for Native American networks to include not only other native populations but also non-native populations in order to continue to strengthen understanding and communication.
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