

Native americans and oral traditions essay sample

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Ethnocentrism is the belief of superiority in one's own personal ethnic group. Many people into today's society may not realize that ethnocentrism occurs everywhere around the globe and every day in life. Ethnocentrism plays many roles in oral literary traditions. This impacted the Native American community dramatically. It was an affect that changed their way of oral tradition forever. When Christopher Columbus discovered the new land he considered its native people an inferior race. Native Americans were consider as heathens; which lead to the beginning of ethnocentrism in America.

Native Americans oral traditions are stories and lesson told verbally through Storytelling, Folktales and Myths. The Native Americans had many cultural ways and oral literary traditions that were impacted by ethnocentrism.

The oral Native American literary tradition commenced as early as the 18th century, long before the Europeans discovered the Native Americans. The Natives had their own beliefs and worldviews. Native American literature did not come about until after the arrival of the Europeans. In early American colony the Europeans often judged the Native Americans by European sensibilities. This meant because the Native culture was not literal or written down their culture was not creditable. The Europeans felt superior to the Native people because they had their own literary traditions. " A written alphabet had been used by Europeans to preserve and communicate information for many centuries, and Gutenberg's invention of moveable type in the mid-1400s had shown the way to a mechanical means of " writing" (Baym 7). The Natives seemed barbarous to the Europeans because they worshiped the land, carved and painted images.

The Natives worshiped animals and the earth; which was very different from the European culture. Oral traditions are frequently told over and over again without change, so it would be a reliable way of passing on traditions. The Europeans had a printing company at that time and the Natives did not rely on text. “ The Native Americans had a lively oral culture that valued memory over mechanical means of preserving their texts and many more groups used visual records in subtle and sophisticated ways” (Baym 11). The Europeans forbade the Natives from speaking their Native language. A lot of the Native culture was lost through translation because there were no English words for some of the Native languages. Another reason was they did not know how to translate oral expressions of non-European language to written English. The Native people were forced into European-American culture. And those that would not convert were forced to live on reservations. In the period of Romanticism literature shifted from letters to an expression of emotions. With this transition the Native’s verbal expression could have easily been literary.

Native Americans did not use a written alphabet; they relied on spoken words. According to Nina Baym, “ In 1942 North America Native people spoke hundreds of languages belonging to entirely different linguistic families, and structured their societies in widely diverse forms” (Baym 7). Each society or tribe had its own language. Each Native society provided memories and heritage of their own tribe. The Oklahoma History Society also states, “ American Indian oral tradition is diverse, vibrant and, in almost all its manifestations, an affirmation of community and individual well-being and identity” (History Society). Native Americans used both oral and written

traditions to express themselves during the colonial period. They used language, imagery and metaphors to get over obstacles to preserve their culture. The Native people used such things as chants, Apahe jokes and Yuman dream songs to display their verbal expression.

Each tribe is made up generations and generations of storytellers.

Storytellers were pick at a young age and were told stories over and over; so when they were old enough they could recite the story without mistakes.

These stories were told in the winter time to children and adults. Storytelling can encompass narratives that are viewed as truthful accounts of events in the ancient past. Storytellers themselves were very important, in fact they are honored and respected members of the tribes. “ In oral performance, a pause, a quacking of pace, a lowering or raising of the voice can affect the audience’s understanding” (Baym 8). Good storytellers were known for their great enthusiasm and dramatic performances. The History Society also says, “ Certain behaviors are to be followed by storytellers, such as spitting on the ground at the conclusion of a story or the use of traditional phrases or introduction or conclusion” (History Society). Some even requested a gift before performing their stories. Native Americans also delivery speeches during dinners or ceremonies. Each speech giving is a form of verbal art that explains their culture and history.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that the Native people started to record the myths and legends of their cultures. Some of the recordings have been altered to suite the taste of the Native American storytellers. In fact according to Nina, Baym, “ Euro-Americans developed the linguistic skills and cultural understanding necessary to translate and transcribe Native

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American creations stories in a manner that begins to do justice to them” (Baym 21). Some Natives feared that the traditional stories would be lost, and agreed with Momaday that they should be preserved in written form. Even with these recordings there was still very little of the Native American songs, stories and cultures. “ Many Anthropologists believed that Native Americans were disappearing and with them their languages and histories; great efforts needed to be made to preserve cultural histories and literatures in writing” (Ruoff).

In the late nineteenth century as anthropologists observed some Native Americans they jotted down stories that were being told and languages that were being spoken. These were some of the ways they were able to obtain some of the Native’s languages and stories. There are very few recordings of this culture, but it is clear that the Native’s voices are destined to be heard. “ Today, many Indian authors agree with Momaday that the stories, songs, ceremonies need to be preserved in writing because any oral tradition is only “ one generation from extinction. Native American authors such as Joy Harjo and Leslie Marmon Silko create new versions of old stories and in so doing, keep the old stories alive for Indians and introduce them to non-Indians” (Boyer). For the Native Americans the oral tradition must be treated with the utmost respect.

The Natives provide such great insight on their rich cultural context and oral teachings. They provide the world with a view of lifestyles and values which are an integral part of their heritage. The Native Americans oral tradition has been and continues to be a primary means through which American Indian values, beliefs and culture are transmitted to the future generations.

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Some Native American stories have lost some luster since it has been put into written form; however their stories will be told for more generations to see. The Europeans eventually began to consider the Natives as human beings and felt that they were more civilized than they thought.

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