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## Intersecting Symbols in Indigenous American and African Material Culture: Diffusion or Independent Invention and Who Decides?

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Intersecting Symbols in Indigenous American and African Material Culture: Diffusion or  
Independent Invention and Who Decides?

A Thesis Presented

by

DONNA L. MOODY

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## DEDICATION

For John, whose love and support made it possible.

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I began this journey in honor of my ancestors, especially those brave-hearted women who provided me with life, knowledge, and a rootedness in this world. They set my feet upon this path and made the journey happen. Ktsi wl'lini.

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ABSTRACT

INTERSECTING SYMBOLS IN INDIGENOUS AMERICAN AND AFRICAN  
MATERIAL CULTURE: DIFFUSION OR INDEPENDENT INVENTION AND WHO  
DECIDES?

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Native American and African American material culture of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to present day appear to hold evidence for a more ancient spiritual and cultural relationship between these two diverse peoples. There is evidence of strikingly similar, and in some instances, identical, pre-Columbian (before 1492) symbols from Africa and North America which allows us to examine questions of diffusion or independent invention.

It is widely documented that Native American and African American peoples have experienced a relationship since 1619 when the first captive Africans were brought to Jamestown and were bartered, as slaves, by the captain of a Dutch frigate in exchange for food. The material culture of these two groups of indigenous peoples due to trade interactions, geography, intermarriage, and shared experiences show that some assimilation of cultural traits has occurred. However, even where traits are shared, aspects of each culture remain distinct.

This thesis provides an examination of cultural practices and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous peoples of North America and Africa through symbols incorporated in the

material culture of each, focusing primarily on textiles and it provides an exploration into the traditional knowledge systems that under-lie the adaptations and syncretism of these culture groups in creating objects and ascribing meaning to symbols. In order to understand the similarities, along with the continuity and retention of ancient belief systems, it is necessary to travel the path back, as far as possible.

Anthropological debates such as diffusion vs. independent invention are encountered and examined. Through the many processes of colonization, the histories of Indigenous peoples have been sanitized or erased to accommodate European hegemony and perceptions of superior knowledge systems. In searching for that which has been misplaced or stolen through colonization, the necessity of supporting an Indigenous praxis of Theory and Method in the discipline of Anthropology is presented. By recognizing Indigenous knowledge systems, and from such a perspective, it would be disingenuous to believe that there was no intercontinental contact between the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and those of Africa prior to 1492.

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# CHAPTER 1 BEGINNINGS OF A JOURNEY

## A. Introduction

What began as research focused solely on similar symbols found in Native American, African, and African American material culture has somehow morphed into a significantly larger project. In simply following where I was led in my research, this thesis developed into a thesis with three major foci: significantly similar symbology in North American and African material culture; pre-Columbian inter-continental contact; and the necessity for Indigenous peoples to decolonize the field of Anthropology and reclaim our knowledge systems. While these three topics may seem disparate at first read, I believe it is logically and rationally impossible to separate the process of colonization from any study of cultural anthropology. I will make the connections within the body of the text; essentially coming full-circle and will, most certainly, produce more questions than definitive answers. Within these pages I will also provide visual examples of American Indian and African/African American spiritual and cultural symbols found in material culture, some of which are strikingly similar in form.

The genesis of this thesis was a cursory interest in African American quilts. It has transformed over the past several years into an intellectual quest for answers to questions that relate and define spiritual and cultural contact between Native Americans and Africans; questions that evolved through recognizing similarities of the symbols used by each group in material culture. The primary questions I sought to answer were: what are the causes of the similarities and does contextual information for the similarities tend to

support direct contact between members of these communities (diffusion) or independent invention? I understand that these questions are as old as, if not older than, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Herskovits/Frazier debate (discussed below) and as recent as the current, continuing exploration of human migration, genetic studies, ancient cultural contact, and theories of diffusion vs. independent invention.

The final motivation for my pursuing this topic of inquiry was provided by my brother-in-law, an otherwise well-educated, intelligent individual who once stated, “The problem with African Americans is that they have no culture.” This is a comment I have heard, and read, from others. I feel a need to provide a response to such an ill-informed, long-held, racist, and Eurocentric perception. This belief is not supported by the wealth of family traditions, oral histories, or the rich, anciently based cultures of today’s African American families and communities. It is not supported by the material culture unearthed on plantation sites; nor is it supported by the material culture being produced by African American people today.

### **B. History**

There exists a universal condition of cultural sharing among diverse groups of Indigenous peoples due to trade interactions and geographically adjacent traditional homelands. Cultural traits are also shared between groups as a result of inter-group marriage and self-determined migrations. From these conditions a natural assimilation of traits often occurs. However, even while traits are shared, aspects of each culture often remain distinct.

The first Indigenous peoples to be enslaved in the Americas by Europeans were Amerindians in the Caribbean, forced into slavery by Columbus for the benefit of the Spanish Crown. Less than 150 years later, the North American continent endured the first wave of European invasion. Indian communities in the northeast were decimated by disease, hunger, and warfare and the Spanish practice of Indigenous slavery was visited on southern and northern New England tribes. Some were sold into forced labor and certain death in the Caribbean, some were sent to the Azore Islands for sale in Portugal and Spain, and some were retained for the New England colonists.

Douglas Harper [2003] references Lorenzo Greene [1942] in saying that slavery in the State of Massachusetts actually predated the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1628 when Samuel Mavericks arrived in the area in 1624 with black slaves [<http://www.slavenorth.com/massachusetts>]. Edgar McManus [2003:6] writes that in 1638, Indians captured in the Pequot War were traded in the West Indies for captive Africans, who were then brought to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. From that historical moment forward, Africans and American Indians in New England held a shared experience of forced labor and loss of freedom. As these two cultural groups lived and worked together, there most certainly was a sharing of cultural traits.

Although Massachusetts never officially abolished slavery by an act of law, a form of gradual emancipation began in the early 1780s following successful litigation brought by several enslaved persons along with a broader interpretation of the state constitution. These two acts brought an end to slavery in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Connecticut and Rhode Island enacted laws of gradual emancipation in 1784. [Melish

1998:64]. Newly freed people of African descent joined southern New England Native communities, many intermarrying with Indian men and women. Prior to enactment of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865 which made slavery illegal, many African and African American people took refuge in Indian communities in both the South and North as runaways, again marrying into Indian families and being absorbed into Indian communities. It would be totally disingenuous to believe that such close and sometimes intimate contact was devoid of a sharing of cultural traits and even spiritual belief systems.

A significant factor in the binary blurring and distinctness of African spiritual rituals ceremonies, and symbology occurred during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to James Perry [1998], in interviewing Dr. Colin Palmer (author of *Passageways, Vol. I: 1619-1863*) for *HighBeam Research*, of an estimated 11-12 million captive Africans that survived the horrors of the Middle Passage from the 1650s to the early 1800s, only 5% initially disembarked on North American soil. The majority of these people were from cultural groups whose homelands were in western Africa; from the coastal regions and extending 500 miles into the hinterlands, from present day Côte d'Ivoire to Angola. Captive Africans were not transported to plantation colonies in family groupings or in large cultural groupings. The rationale behind this practice was based in a fear of slave rebellions or uprisings; it was believed that there would be less opportunity for rebellion if the captives had difficulty communicating [<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-5364733.html>]. But this practice also created a condition that allowed for the sharing of cultural practices and spiritual belief systems as captive Africans negotiated their new

lives under the institution of slavery. The African Diaspora, whether of voluntary migrations within Africa or forced migrations throughout the Americas by means of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, inevitably produced conditions of cultural and spiritual sharing.

### **C. Herskovits vs. Frazier Debate**

My initial exposure to this controversy occurred in 2009 at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, being introduced in a class, 'The Anthropology of Slavery,' taught by Dr. Whitney Battle-Baptiste. The central theme of this debate between the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and anthropologist Melvin J. Herskovits was initiated by Frazier positing in 1939 a loss of all African cultural traits in African American communities due to the overwhelming brutality of the Middle Passage and the institution of slavery. In 1941 Herskovits responded with a compendium of literally hundreds of African American practices which are rooted in Africa.

Herskovits strongly argued for African cultural survival in the Americas. He gathered evidence to substantiate his position with field work in Dahomey, Ghana, Haiti, Suriname and Trinidad as well as in the United States. Much of his work included photos and film which documented the cultural connections of African descendant people. [Williams 2009:220-223]. Herskovits carried on the debate with the premise of Frazier's disappearance of Africanisms in his (at the time) controversial book *The Myth of the Negro Past* [1941].

For several decades the debate was carried forward by adherents to the position of either Frazier or Herskovits. According to Richard Cullen Rath [2000:101], Frazier informed the work of Elkins, Stamp, and Genovese who believed that any relationship

to Africanisms were minor and isolated. John Blassingame [1972] and Herbert Gutman [1976] expanded on Herskovits' position in their writings of *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* [1972] and *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* [1976].

Rath [2000:101] writes that in 1976 anthropologists Richard Price and Sidney Mintz developed a concept which included both Frazier's and Herskovits' positions.

Mintz and Price drew an analogy between creolized language and creolized culture that focused inquiry on 'deep structures.' Specifically, they compared 'underlying values and beliefs' with 'unconscious grammatical principles.' Mintz and Price contended that values and beliefs, because they existed at a deeper level, had a better chance of surviving the middle passage and planter deculturation strategies than did material objects and surface expressions. Creolized cultures, they contended, were *like* creolized languages, in that African-derived deep structures survived even where the various lexicon and surface expressions might not.

This appears to be a strange compromise and one not based in fact because there is a wealth of extant material culture to indicate more than a deeply buried memory of Africa.

These deep structures, unconscious expressions of linguistic and cultural meanings, may be found in African American contemporary quilts. Three generations of African American quilters from the deep South were interviewed by Maude Southwell Wahlman [2001] while conducting research of African images in quilts. Several women reported that the style and imagery they use in their construction of quilts is done because, "That's the way my mama taught me," or "I just do what my grandma did." Other quilters, most often of the older generations, narrate the reasons they incorporate certain colors, style, and symbols in their quilts: visual symbols of hands as charms for protection; asymmetry



to confuse malevolent spirits; geographical diamond shapes representing the four directions or the movement of the Kongo sun; the color red for protection; applied images of dogs, believed to be messengers from the ancestors; and numerous others. All of this provides multi-vocal evidence of both deeply buried memories and continuity of a conscious oral tradition.

Frazier's premise holds that African American culture has been developed in the image of Euro-American culture; essentially that the condition of slavery totally eradicated captive Africans of their own culture. This belief obviously was taught in the classrooms of higher education in the 1960s when my much loved brother-in-law was a student. And Dr. Battle-Baptiste's assessment of this debate? "Debate is impossible because archaeologists conflate behavior with culture" [class lecture, 9/15/09].

I believe there is a cultural continuity between the first captive Africans, beginning with those brought to Virginia in 1619, [[www.nps.gov/jame/historyculture/african-americans-at-jamestown.htm](http://www.nps.gov/jame/historyculture/african-americans-at-jamestown.htm)] and their African American descendants today. And, I believe that continuity is evidenced in the material culture, including textiles, of today's African-American artists and in the ceremonial rituals of African traditional religious practitioners. By examining the ancient African cultures of the Dahomey, Nigerian, and BaKongo peoples, the threads of that continuity will be evident and obvious in African American culture found today in the United States.

#### **D. Research Background**

My interest in Native American and African American symbols began serendipitously with the reading of a novel, *The Sugar Camp Quilt* by Jennifer Chiaverini (2006), that

centered on an antique quilt from the early-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Antebellum South of the United States. When the mystery of the quilt was unraveled, it was discovered that the quilt had been used as a ‘signal quilt’ to aid runaway captive Africans in their journey to freedom in the North or to Canada. Even as a quilter I had never heard of this use of quilts; the differing colors used in the construction, the specific pattern used, and the hanging of a quilt on a clothesline or fence (as if to air) all had meaning; meanings which provided a ‘map’ of geographical directions or which indicated a ‘safe house’ where shelter, food, and clothing could be found. These quilts are known in Folk Art and Folk Lore circles as *Underground Railroad Quilts*.

The validity of this folklore—that quilts were used in this manner—has been debated, sometimes quite heatedly. The controversy surrounding the legitimacy of quilts being used as signaling devices on the Underground Railroad was initiated with the publication in 2000 of the book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. The authors, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, began the writing of the book and subsequent research into the topic based on testimony given in interviews by Ozela McDaniel Williams, an African American quilter in Charleston, South Carolina. Cuesta Benberry, a scholar, educator, and historian invested almost four decades in the study of quilts, especially African American quilts. Benberry was acknowledged as *the* expert in her field and wrote a number of books and articles on African American quilts. Cuesta Benberry wrote the forward to Tobin and Dobard’s book. Others who researched the subject and support the concept of Underground Railroad Quilts, are Gladys-Marie Fry, Professor Emerita of Folklore and English at the University of Maryland and Maude

Southwell Wahlman, professor of Art History at the University of Missouri. Both Fry and Wahlman have a long history of researching, interpreting, and writing about African and African American material culture. And, Whitney Battle-Baptiste [2011] references Underground Railroad quilts in her book *Black Feminist Archaeology*.

There are also those who dispute the ability of captive Africans to know and understand the meanings or to have had access to the word-of-mouth knowledge of this aid in the flight to safety. Negative opinions of the Underground Railroad quilt stories have been given by Giles R. Wright, director of the Afro-American History Program, New Jersey Historical Commission. A critique titled *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* was written by Wright in 2001 in which he presented at an event of the Camden, New Jersey Historical Society [[http://historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews11\\_doc\\_01a.shtml](http://historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews11_doc_01a.shtml)]. I find it interesting that the title of his critique is strikingly similar to the title of Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard's [1999] book, *Hidden in Plain View*, whose veracity Wright disputes.

Wright [2000:1] identifies seven areas in his critique in which he takes issue. The first criticism Wright lists is, "1. Neither of the co-authors (in reference to Tobin and Dobard) is a black historian. In order to write knowledgeably about the UGRR, you must first be a student of the black historical experience in which the story of the UGRR is located..." It should be noted in Dr. Dobard's defense, he is African American and teaches Art History at Howard University. The remaining six criticisms on Wright's list concern lack of documentation of the stories, historical inaccuracies, and improbability of the events.

Another author who views the Underground Railroad quilt stories as invalid is Leigh

Fellner [2006]. Fellner identifies herself as a quilt expert. I was unable to find any biographical information about Fellner other than she is a white woman living in Florida. Fellner has written a substantial paper of 141 pages titled *Betsy Ross redux: the Underground Railroad "Quilt Code"* [<http://www.ugrrquilt.hartcottagequilts.com>]. Of these pages, fifteen are given over to appendices and bibliography and twenty five are devoted to discussing a fraudulently advertised antique chair.

Fellner's [2006] biases are evident on almost every page of her paper. For example, on page 44 Fellner states, "Quilt Code proponents often draw a direct connection between a generic idea of African use of symbols and secret societies (as if these are unique to that continent) and Prince Hall Masonry." The author's parenthetical comment made me uncomfortable with citing Fellner. The lack of documented opposing views by academics was the sole influence in my decision to include her in this paper.

Fellner [2006:49] also attempts to discredit Cuesta Benberry, Gladys-Marie Fry, and Maude Southwell Wahlman. While Fellner appears to hold a somewhat grudging respect for Benberry as a quilt historian, she readily dismisses Dr. Fry as a folklorist and Dr. Wahlman as "...a white professor of art history."

Wright and Fellner are only two of a very small number who dispute the use of quilts as signals along the Underground Railroad. But, despite the 'nay-sayers,' my curiosity was piqued.

As I began to explore the story of Underground Railroad quilts, I was quickly redirected to another path of research. I read Maude Wahlman's [2001] book, *Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*. In this book I found a symbol that

has been in use among some African cultural groups in men's secret spiritual societies since ancient times. This same symbol is an ancient spiritual symbol related to 'Land and Life' found in the cosmology of the Hopi Indians of the American southwest. I began to wonder about the possible connections that may have occurred between two groups of people on vastly separated continents long before Columbus' supposed discovery of the Americas.

While exploring other African symbols I found many similarities between North American and African Indigenous tribal peoples and I began looking for expression of these symbols in textiles and other forms of material culture. From an archaeological perspective, there are few locations in the world with a climate that is conducive to the preservation of textiles. However, Indigenous peoples have, since ancient times, used symbols on many items of material culture such as pottery, baskets, and in beadwork along with the weaving of textiles. It is only logical to look at other items of material culture for evidence of iconography and symbols that were most likely replicated in weavings or other forms of textile arts. Many of these symbols continue to be woven into, or printed onto, textiles today. Many symbols were also used in the making of quilts for personal use in the 'quarters' of plantation sites prior to 1860 and following emancipation. Some symbols continue to find their way into contemporary quilts and textiles made by descendants of the first captive Africans and in modern day American Indian cultural materials. Many of the symbols used in contemporary work by American Indians and African Americans are connected to ancient oral traditions of cosmology and creation.

The intersection of African and Native American symbols and cultures continues to be of great interest to me as is the continued use of these symbols in modern day textiles and other objects of modern material culture. I am increasingly interested in the origin of African contact with Indigenous peoples of the Americas and with the logistics of how these ancient symbols and their meanings were transported from their point of origin in Africa to the Americas; how they were subsequently carried through the Middle Passage by captive Africans, how the associated rituals and ceremonies evolved through contact with the belief systems of other African cultural groups, how the symbols and ceremonies were used as forms of resistance to the condition of an enslaved people, and how those symbols are used and viewed by the African American descendants of the first captive Africans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

As with any Indigenous people, religious beliefs and practices, oral traditions, healing ways, and ancestral knowledge are interconnected and inform what constitutes culture. Holding to this knowledge of what informs culture, along with my personal world-view, I am drawn to learning and understanding the ways in which the many ethnic groups of 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century African people transported their belief and knowledge systems to North America by way of the Middle Passage and the African Diaspora. And, how all of this ancient knowledge was kept in defiance to the condition of slavery in order to ensure the survival of those cultures to present day.

In order to gain a small measure of understanding of the representation of symbols, I have explored the migration of spiritual belief systems from Africa to the Americas. I have given only a cursory look at how those belief systems have been transformed into

the religions of Santeria, Candomblé, and Vodun. It is important to examine these religious beliefs in order to gain a basic understanding of how the beliefs transported from Africa during the diasporic trans-Atlantic slave trade evolved into a syncretization of belief systems, and how those spiritual beliefs were further transformed through contact with Europeans and forced conversion to Christianity.

Since the onset of European invasion which began in the Americas and ended in world domination, the Euro-American mind has shown little interest in *understanding* the cultures of the Indigenous peoples subjected to colonization. Walter Mignolo [2003] identifies the methods in which colonization is accomplished; colonization of space by separating Indigenous peoples physically from their land, colonization of place by change of language such as a change of place names, and colonization of memory by writing the history of a land and its people through a Eurocentric lens. Native American peoples have been viewed by European colonizers and their descendants collectively as being ‘Indians,’ when in actuality there exists over 700 distinct nations in the continental United States alone. In this same myopic understanding, the peoples inhabiting the large continent of Africa were, and I would argue remain, viewed simply as ‘Africans.’ In reality, the African continent is composed of over 800 diverse cultural identities. And, in North America and Africa, each cultural group or nation is often further divided into subsets.

My research has mainly been confined to the African cultural groups of Dahomey; the Fon, a subgroup of the Ewe, who are the dominant people of today’s Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey) in West Africa; Nigeria, including the Ejagham who invented the

Nsibidi system of symbols, the Yoruba, and the Igbo (or Ibo); and the peoples of BaKongo. I have chosen these groups because of their geographical proximity in Africa and because of their shared experience of being the major cultural groups that lived as captive Africans enslaved in North America from 1650-1865. Research has been furthered by conversations with African American scholars such as Whitney Battle-Baptiste, John Bracey, Valerie Cunningham, Melissane Parm Schrems, and Michael Blakey along with spiritual leaders and adherents Ochazania Klarich, Trevor Baptiste, and Andrea Battle.

My research in Native American material culture has been informed by ancestral knowledge, examination of summaries of archaeological sites, examination of ancient petroglyphs, conversations with elders and tradition keepers, speaking with archaeologists in the northeast, and examining contemporary materials created by American Indian artists. I have also examined writings of creation stories, oral traditions, and how cosmology is represented in pre- and post-contact material culture.



## CHAPTER 2

### MATERIAL CULTURE AND ORAL TRADITION

This chapter is designed to present two lines of evidence for this thesis; the line of material culture and the line of oral tradition. Each of these areas have been criticized as having little significant value. However, I would argue that African American and Native American objects and oral histories are as important as written documentation, which may carry personal biases of the writer, and that these objects and histories carry value. I will first present matters of materiality and then matters of oral tradition.

One need only to look at the material culture of the past and that of the present to see the continuity of a tradition and a People: from the intricate weaving patterns of Africa to the modern day quilting patterns of African Americans; from the Wampum belts, decorative bead and quill works of Native people hundreds of years ago to the quilting and decorative design in use today among American Indian artists. Not only have the designs remained intact, the meanings of those designs continue to be understood. There is an Indigenous history connected to Native American and African textile production and stories which tell of how these things were brought to humans. According to Kent McManis & Robert Jeffries [1997:6], the following is one such oral tradition.

The Navajo believe that the gift of weaving was taught to them by Spider Woman, one of the Navajo Holy People. Spider Woman originally showed Changing Woman (another holy person) how to weave, with the stipulation that she would in turn teach the Navajo. Spider Man showed them how to make the loom and tools out of sacred Navajo stones and shells (turquoise, jet, white shell, and abalone), as well as with the earth, sun, rain, sky, themselves. This important connection to the earth and elements is characteristic of the Navajo respect and reverence for the natural world. It also demonstrates the significance of weaving within the Navajo religion.

A similar legend from Africa, which was accessed from an online site, [[kente.midwesttradegroup.com/history.html](http://kente.midwesttradegroup.com/history.html)] tells the story of the origin of Kente cloth,

Although Kente, as we know it was developed in the 17th Century A.D. by the Ashanti people, it has its roots in a long tradition of weaving in Africa dating back to about 3000 B.C. The origin of Kente is explained with both a legend and historical accounts. A legend has it that a man named Ota Karaban and his friend Kwaku Ameyaw from the town of Bonwire (now the leading Kente weaving center in Ashanti), learned the art of weaving by observing a spider weaving its web. Taking a cue from the spider, they wove a strip of raffia fabric and later improved upon their skill. They reported their discovery to their chief Nana Bobie, who in turn reported it to the Asantehene (The Ashanti Chief) at that time. The Asantehene adopted it as a royal cloth and encouraged its development as a cloth of prestige reserved for special occasions.

Early colonial documentation exists from the northeast in the United States of contact period use of fiber and decoration of finished articles. In an article for the *American Anthropologist*, Charles Willoughby [1905:88] writes,

According to this writer (Gookin), rushes, bents (coarse grass), maize husks, silk grass, and wild hemp were used for baskets and bags, some of which were very neatly made and ornamented with designs of birds, beasts, fishes, and flowers.....Wood writes: 'In the summer the Indians gather hemp and rushes and material for dyes with which they make curious baskets with intermixed colors and portraitures of antique Imagerie.'

Further in this same article Willoughby [1905:90] writes,

It is impossible to determine to what extent the finer textiles were used, but we know that the New England Indians made a serviceable closely-woven cloth of Indian hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*) and probably also of the soft bast of the linden.

There is also contemporary documentation of fiber work and decoration found in an

archaeological site in northwestern Vermont. In 1973, during the course of construction, an Abenaki burial ground in Highgate, Vermont was inadvertently uncovered. The burial ground has been known since as "The Boucher Site". As so often happened in the dark days before NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act 1990), all of the burials were removed for study along with the associated grave goods which included 99 fragments of textiles and 56 fragments of cordage. This burial ground was subsequently dated from "1915 BC-80 AD" (3915 BP-1920 BP). The one textile that was subjected to C-14 dating was dated to "570 BC" (2570 BP). All of the materials used were of vegetal matter including the fibers of Milkweed, Indian Hemp, Basswood and Slippery Elm. The textiles were of a finely woven fabric and included 35 items made into clothing, cloth coverings, and bags. [J. Moody, personal communication, April 8, 2008].

According to Heckenberger, Petersen, King, and Basa, [1996:56] the cordage was made of animal hide thong and of twisted vegetal fiber strands. The single ply was spun with a Z twist, and the 2, 3, and 4 ply were all Z twist spun with an S twist plying. These twists, Z and S, represent the direction in which the fibers were spun. A very interesting fact relating to the preparation of fibers prior to the weaving is that modern-day spinners and weavers use a Z twist for spinning singles and an S twist for plying multiple strands. A. C. Whitford [1941:17] writes that early use of vegetal fibers evidenced a mixing of fibers, not only in 2 ply cords but also in single strands.

From this same article by Heckenberger, et.al. [1996:66] we learn that some of the fabric in the Boucher textiles was decorated with moose hair woven into a pattern in a geometric design (specifically 'chevron' design). Many modern day Native American

artists use porcupine quills and horse/moose hair, either dyed or natural, in a false embroidery technique on baskets, bags, hair clips, etc. An Abenaki craftsman reports remembering his father and grandmother making coiled horsehair baskets. [J. Moody, personal communication, April 8, 2008]. The Heckenberger [1996:64] article states, "The uniform structural characteristics of the textiles and the complicated nature of their construction indicates that the Boucher population possessed *a well developed fiber technology.*" [emphasis added].

Pottery has been found from all of the time periods in the northeast (and elsewhere) having rims with decorative edges which were made by pressing cordage into the wet clay. Robert Goodby relates a full surface treatment of fabric pressed into wet clay, made by a cloth-wrapped wooden paddle imprinting the outside of a vessel and even, sometimes, imprinting both the outside and inside of the pottery. These fabric pressed, surface treated vessels have been identified almost exclusively with the more 'ancient' samples (as in the Boucher time period) and far less often on later made pottery, although the process is now being replicated by Indian artisans. Again, as in the Boucher fabrics, these textiles were made of vegetal weavings. Goodby also explains that one decorative technique used on pottery rims was effected by tightly wrapping twine around a stick and pressing the wet clay of the rim. [R. Goodby, personal communication, April 11, 2008]

There are countless other references to pre-contact textile production in Native cultures in the Americas. The questions in this author's mind are what tools were used by my ancestors to spin and weave the sophisticated textiles that were found with the Boucher People? Was it the women who produced the textiles or, as in Africa, men who did the

weaving, as we see today in many of the world cultures. Perhaps the answers to these questions are not necessary, simply the knowledge of our oral tradition which tells us that the Native Peoples of the northeast had a rich, sophisticated, and technologically advanced culture and society millennia before European invasion.

### **A. Marginalization and Devaluation of Oral Tradition**

The so-called Age of Enlightenment established the process by which oral tradition would be discounted, devalued, and dismissed as superfluous and capricious when histories of Indigenous peoples were constructed by European scholars. These processes have endured to present day, over 500 years later. The popular ideologies of the Age of Enlightenment proposed that peoples without alphabetic writing were uncivilized, intellectually less evolved, and incapable of recording their own histories. These beliefs served the process of colonization in very concrete ways. The emphasis on this ideology was to justify the subservient social status of indigenous people and the exploitation of the people and their resources for European capitalist gains. It also excused the acts of European barbarism inflicted on colonized people. This endeavor most often included erasing their histories which left them with fractured identities, disconnection from spiritual belief systems, and disconnection from their ancestors.

Walter Mignolo [2003:125-169] speaks of several historical European figures who influenced popular European thinking. One of these scholars is Isadore of Seville. Isadore was a 6<sup>th</sup> century scholar who, according to Mignolo [2003:136-137], "...contributed to a notion of history related to alphabetic writing that would prove crucial to the future expansion of the Christian West and the construction of a new idea of

Europe.” Isidore believed that alphabetic writing was invented for the sole purpose of recording history, or as he termed it, “res memoria” (the memories of things).

Isidore’s concept of history was informed by Cicero, a concept which defined history as a narrative of past events and a way of knowing those events. However, he either could not, or would not, make a distinction between a narrative of what was witnessed and a narrative of a narrative of what was witnessed. Mignolo [2003:139] quotes Isidore by writing, “Things that are seen are reported without any ambiguity...only the things deemed worthy of memory were written down. Therefore, histories are called monuments because they perpetuate notable events.” The obvious problem with this ‘writing of history’ is the fact that it is totally subjective, only what is deemed to be of interest to the observer is written. Following this line of thought, only what is considered important to the colonizer is what appears in the colonial archive. All of the pre-colonial history of the colonized is eliminated because it is not witnessed by those writing the archive along with the view of the event by the colonized. In this context, written history is as inaccurate as present day scholars consider oral tradition to be. Yet the written word is held in the highest esteem and oral tradition is considered to hold little, if any, value along with all non-alphabetic systems of communication.

Another way in which oral tradition is marginalized is through the European concept of gender and gender roles. Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999:45] writes of how Western concepts of race intersect with Western concepts of gender. This intersection of race and gender occurs when the concept of each, or both, translates into an image of the subservient ‘other.’ Smith writes that depictions of Indigenous women by Europeans

have resulted in women being marginalized within their own societies as well as in colonizing societies. In many Indigenous communities of the Americas, women as midwives, healers, and storytellers are often the tradition keepers, holding and passing on traditional systems of knowledge surrounding medicines, cultural birthing traditions, and personal and communal oral histories which may all be an aspect of spiritual belief systems. As women became objects of scorn and objects of service to men, their role as knowledge keepers became eroded and eventually seen as holding no value, along with the knowledge itself. This perception has held sway for most of the history of anthropology as a field of study. Until very recently, anthropology has been the domain of white male scholars holding fast to European stereotypes of the inability of females, and especially females of color, to have little of the intellectual capacity necessary to be fully engaged as scholars.

Other oral tradition that has been discredited and considered of little consequence is that of former captive Africans. A significant amount of oral tradition has been preserved in the interviews conducted in the 1930s-1940s by employees of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, archived in the Library of Congress and some State archives, commonly known as the *WPA Slave Narratives*.

Built on the European paradigm of what constitutes history, these narratives, as relayed to interviewers of the WPA, have been called into question as to accuracy and as to being reliable resources. In an article written for *Antiquity*, co-authored by Timothy Ruppel, Jessica Neuwirth, Mark P. Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry [2003:323], the authors cite four reasons why these primary sources should be viewed with caution:

First, the majority of informants were in their seventies, eighties, and even nineties when they were interviewed. Their memories, therefore, might be suspect due to old age. Secondly, many of the informants were children during the antebellum period....Third, many of the informants were interviewed by the sons, daughters or relations of their former enslavers...Finally, and most damaging, many interviewers and editors sought to maintain the paternalistic image of the old South, Thus, material was deleted at the editing stage,...

While I cannot speak to the third and fourth conditions, I feel a need to respond to the first and second. People who descend from an oral tradition typically hold memories that are startlingly vivid and accurate. This, quite frankly, is why the transmission of oral tradition and a people's history has remained an accurate and successful method of maintaining an unbroken cultural thread for thousands of years.

Also, very traumatic conditions classically are etched in one's memory for a life-time. There should be little doubt that the incidents reported by former enslaved people when being interviewed were anything less than accurate and as vivid as when those incidents originally occurred. Efforts to discredit those memories are nothing more than an attempt to sanitize them, a way to uphold the privilege of 'whiteness,' and a method to retain control of history, even the shared history of two groups of people divided by different communal histories.

Many of the *WPA Slave Narratives* contain accounts of healing practices, medicine plants, spiritual belief systems, and stories of origin. These topics are the same types of information of traditions and knowledge systems passed in verbal form, from generation-to-generation, in other Indigenous cultural communities. The devaluation and skepticism with which these systems of conveying knowledge are met with by the dominant Euro-



American culture, academic institutions, and scholarly fields of practice are forms of violence to Indigenous communities and a means of attempted erasure of identity, memory, and agency.

Jack Forbes [2008:24] defines the word ‘cannibalism’ as “...the consuming of another’s life for one’s own private purpose or profit.” Euro-American concepts of what constitutes ‘civilized’ is just a precursor to the coming of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry’s massacre of Lakota people at Wounded Knee in 1890; by erasing and rewriting our Indigenous histories in the image of themselves, they have consumed the essence, the life, of Indigenous people. Forbes [2008:173] also defines ‘psychosis’ as a “sickness of the soul/spirit.” Perhaps it is this sickness that created the colonization and genocide that became a global blight.

When oral tradition and indigenous knowledge systems are not viewed as valuable tools and when they are divorced from material culture, the vast amount of artifacts that are, and have been, excavated will never be properly interpreted. The objects held within sacred bundles have no meaning and cannot be understood without the Indigenous understandings of their use. Signs and symbols incorporated into material culture imbue those objects with Spirit. There is a concept of Spirit which is incomprehensible to those who do not know the history and traditional spiritual belief of these things which makes interpretation impossible.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **AFRICAN SYMBOLS**

This chapter will provide a brief history of textile production in Africa and how that knowledge and African style and form was transported to the Americas beginning in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of captive Africans. The symbols incorporated into African made pottery and textiles in North America will be examined along with the spiritual interpretations that informed early African culture in what is now the United States. The same signs and symbols provide evidence for a cultural continuity, many being found in contemporary African American material culture.

#### **A. History of African Textiles**

Textiles were developed in Africa as early as 2000 years ago when cotton was domesticated along the Niger River in Mali and used for fishnets and woven cloth. The earliest surviving East African textiles are dated to about 1000 AD. According to Maude Wahlman [2001:39] these textiles were made of natural white cotton with designs created from Indigo. Indigo is a blue dye which grows wild in Africa and is still in use today. Spinners and weavers use the Indigo dyes to obtain the richest and most striking, shades of blue.

The knowledge of textile production, colors, and designs woven into the cloth was easily transported to North America with the first captive Africans in 1618 and that knowledge continued to be reinforced through 1808 when the legal commercial venture of importing human beings from Africa into slavery in the United States finally came to an end. Textile production was not the only material cultural knowledge retained;

production of pottery also survived the Middle Passage. Through the work and writing of Leland Ferguson [1999:116] we learn that colonial and post-colonial pottery made on plantations were often inscribed with Central African religious symbols. The initial discovery of these items of pottery in Colonial Williamsburg credited the making to local Native Americans. Excavations on plantations in South Carolina revealed that this pottery was used by the occupants of the plantation quarters—the living quarters of those enslaved. A number of fragments were discovered with markings on the inside bottom of the vessel, a location perhaps not easily visible. Many of the markings were interpreted to be symbols associated with the Bakongo cosmogram. In support of cross-cultural contact, Ferguson [1999:116-17] writes,

They appear to represent material aspects of African religion incorporated into the creolized culture of African Americans. Different from acculturation, creolization emphasizes the creative character of early American, including African American, culture. In creating their American subculture, African Americans drew elements from African, European, and Native American culture and combined these into a new and unique way of life. My argument here is that inscribing the Bakongo cosmogram on the center of clay bowls was one of those elements.

Culture is not a static condition. While there is much that survives intact through oral tradition, there is also a natural adaptation to changed social, economic, and political environments. Once in this country, a natural melding of African, Native American, and European textile traditions occurred. The borrowing of style and ideas in culturally different populations has existed since the beginning of humanity, with the human interactions of geographically adjacent cultural groups.

The survival of cultural practices and spiritual belief systems among American Indians and African people can be viewed as a form of resistance to forcefully imposed changes in life-ways and geographic location. The loss of homeland, kinship relationships, and language along with physical and psychological abuse often creates deep-seated traumas and threatens anciently held worldviews and understandings of personal identity. The adherence to ancient knowledge systems and ways of being provides a means of survival through these traumas.

Oral tradition has ensured the survival of these ancient beliefs, ceremonies, and cultural ways. The use of symbols and iconography has facilitated the passing on of tribal histories, religious ceremonies, and spiritual belief systems for millennia. These ancient symbols can be found in material culture that dates from pre-European invasion down to present day in both Native American and African American textile arts, as well as in other art forms. These sacred items today are categorized as Arts and Crafts, a term which gives evidence to the lack of understanding and lack of validation of these materials as a form of documenting history. Diminishing the connection to ancient roots through oral tradition is part of the colonizing process that has endured to present day in the Americas for over 500 years.

### **B. Symbols from Ancient Africa and Modern African America**

Symbols of ancient African writing systems are incorporated into woven and quilted textiles world-wide, wherever people of African descent have migrated, emigrated, or been forcefully relocated. Maude Southwell Wahlman [2001:88] displays several images in her book *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*. One image





which they live. We can look at the traditional weavings of textiles in Africa, even today, and see some of the same symbols being used as in the Antebellum South and in more contemporary textiles in the United States.

The following picture is of an Ukara Cloth from the Igbo people of Nigeria. The cloth pictured is of a contemporary factory-woven textile made of cotton and dyed with indigo. Much of the designs on the Ukara Cloths are nsibidi symbols. Even though this iconography was developed by the Ejagham people, the use of nsibidi symbols and meanings has naturally extended to the Igbo and Ibibio who are close neighbors of the Ejagham.

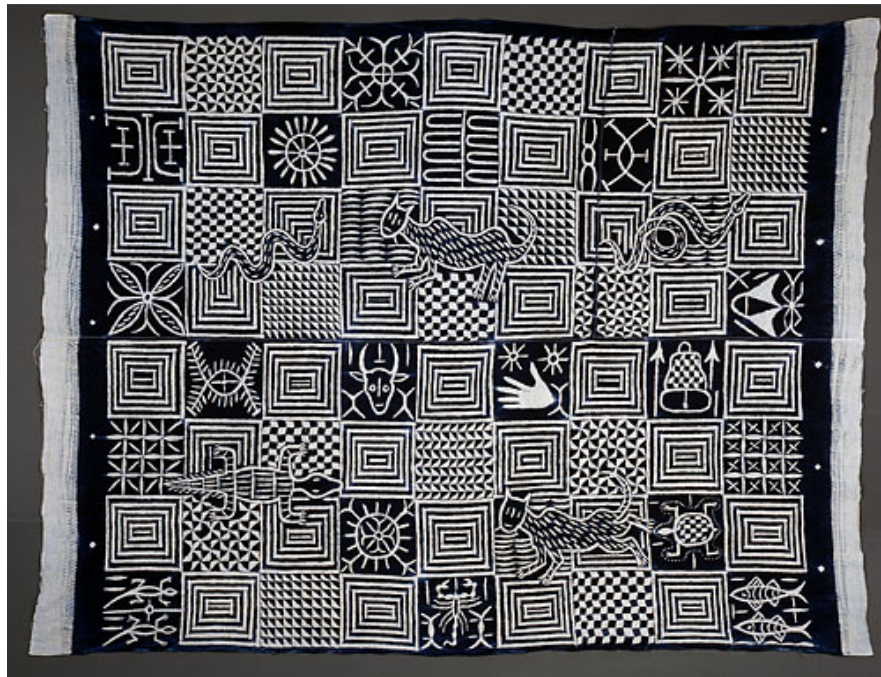


Plate 4 Ukara Cloth

The Ukara cloths are typically worn by high-ranking men. The nsibidi symbols of animals are imbued with power and when interpreted in context with the social symbols identify the socio-political control of that particular secret society. These meanings are usually known only to the wearer or to other members of his society.

Victor Ekpuk is an artist who was born in Nigeria. In an interview for *Seeds and Fruit* he had this to say about the nsibidi symbols,

Nsibidi is an ancient form of sacred communication among the male secret societies of the Ibibio, Efik, Ejagham and Igbo peoples of southeastern Nigeria. It uses mime, speech, and placement of objects and graphic symbols that represent concepts. Being secret codes of communication, their meanings were revealed only to initiates. Some aspects of these signs are secularized and used for public notices and record keeping. The graphic aspect of Nsibidi thus becomes one of Africa's indigenous writing systems. [<http://www.seedsandfruit.com>]

Another example of African symbology can be found in the Egungon costumes of the Yoruba. The Egungun is a society which specifically honors the ancestors and seeks their protection. Many of the symbols found on this costuming are known as 'charms'—those things that are often worn to ask something of the spirit world, usually protection or healing.



Plate 5 Igbo Spirit Mask and Costume

[image from: [www.hamillgallery.com/SITE/Costumes.html](http://www.hamillgallery.com/SITE/Costumes.html)]



### C. African Symbols in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American Quilts

Examining African and African American quilts from the Antebellum South to present day leaves little room to question the transportation of an intact oral tradition from Africa to the Americas via the traumas of the Middle Passage. This transporting of spiritual beliefs, ancestral knowledge, and oral history speaks volumes to the tenacity with which a people may hold to their identity.

Gladys-Marie Fry [1990:7] writes in her book, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*,

In fact, slave quilters, who were forced by plantation rules to work within a Euro-American tradition, found inventive ways to disguise within the quilt improvisational forms and elements from African cosmology and mythology. A strong and continued belief in cosmology is evidenced by representations of the sun, the Congo cross, and the frequent use of red and white which comes from the Shango cult of Nigeria.

Harriet Powers was born into slavery in 1837. Harriet made at least two appliquéd pictorial quilts in 1885-1886. One now resides at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and the other, her most famous Bible Quilt, lives at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts. If Powers made other quilts, their condition and location remain unknown.

In reference to Harriet Powers' Bible Quilt, Gladys-Marie Fry [1990:13] writes, "Another intriguing aspect of Harriet Powers's quilts is the merging of Christian religious symbols with the African cosmology of the Bakongo people" [Dahomey-explanation added]. In the following image it is interesting to note the use Powers made of symbols found in African cosmology, such as the repeated sun images, crosses, arrows, snake, and

horse shoe, along with images from Christian bible stories. And in this particular quilt, Powers also incorporated the image of an angel along with what may be interpreted as the crucifixion of Christ and the two thieves. This perhaps is another example of the ‘creolization’ Ferguson spoke of in referring to pottery. The repeated horse-shoe shapes may represent Ogun, the god of iron, the *orisha* that may be called upon to exact vengeance. If this was Powers’ intent, then it was a very strong statement on her part in relationship to the condition of slavery, for once Ogun is summoned there is no holding him back. It is also interesting to compare the African images on Powers’ quilt with those on Plate 4 and Plate 5.



Plate 6 Bible Quilt

[image from Fry, 1990, p. 87]

In looking at a more contemporary quilt, as in Plate 7, evidence of cultural continuity is further documented. This quilt was made by Sarah Mary Taylor [1916-2000], an African American woman, in 1980. Hands are frequently seen in African iconography as charm symbols, again to seek protection.



Plate 7 Hands Quilt

[image from: [www.philamuseum.org/](http://www.philamuseum.org/)]

One final quilt to look at was made in 1965 by Lillie Mae Pettway [1927-1990], a quilter from Gee's Bend, Alabama. The interesting, and typical, aspect of this quilt is the lack of symmetry in the pieced blocks. African religious belief is that evil, or spirits who would do harm, travel in a straight path. There are a number of pictures of slave cabin interiors with walls covered in newsprint or other paper with writing. This practice was not for the purpose of insulating the walls, but was to confuse those spirits that might do harm in the belief that the spirits would be so involved in the reading of the print they would not act on their initial intent. In a similar manner, the lack of symmetry serves as a form of protection for those who sleep under these quilts—the pattern confuses those spirits intent on harm.

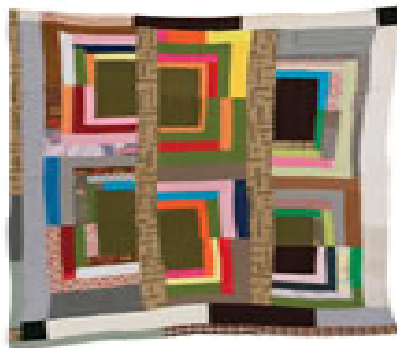


Plate 8 Contemporary Quilt

[image from: [www.tinwoodmedia.com/](http://www.tinwoodmedia.com/)]

A number of symbols have been incorporated into the textiles shown in this chapter along with the significance to African spiritual beliefs. These images and use also provide evidence for cultural continuity. Striking similarities with ancient Native American symbols, still in use today, will be shown in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### NATIVE AMERICAN SYMBOLS

In the previous chapter, symbols and meanings on African and African American textiles was presented. This chapter will examine the symbols and meanings found in Native American material culture. The chapter will also establish a visual comparison of symbols between the two cultures and illuminate the similarities, not only in imagery but also in interpretation.

#### A. Symbols from Ancient America

Some of the earliest evidence of Native American iconography which has survived is the ancient petroglyphs. Petroglyphs have been found in all geographic areas of the United States. Below are two images of petroglyphs on Atlatl Rock in the Valley of Fire in Nevada. These petroglyphs are said to be 4,000 years old. Note the similarity between these symbols and the symbols used in the African nsibidi (Plate 3, p.19), specifically the cross symbols and human images. Both are ancient forms of writing, ancient forms of communicating, and ancient forms of documenting history.



Plate 9 Atlatl Rock Petroglyphs

[image from: <http://www.livingwilderness.com/southwest/petroglyphs.html>]



Plate10 Atlatl Rock Petroglyphs

[image from: <http://www.livingwilderness.com/southwest/petroglyphs.html>]

The next two images are from the petroglyphs at Bellows Falls, Vermont.



Plate 11 Bellows Falls, VT Petroglyphs



Plate 12 Bellows Falls, VT Petroglyphs

[images from [www.danaxtell.com/bf/bfpetrog.html](http://www.danaxtell.com/bf/bfpetrog.html)]

These images date to 2000 years BP (before present). What appears to be yellow paint outlining the figures is exactly that; in the 1930s, the local DAR decided that the images were eroding and so had them chiseled deeper and subsequently had them outlined in yellow paint! Even more alarming is the fact that ersatz ‘Indians’ have recently painted

the carvings red. Interpretive explanations that have circulated in Vermont archaeological circles range from the shamanic dreaming of aliens to the carvings of Celts. Assigning creation of the petroglyphs to people not indigenous to this area simply illuminates the on-going belief that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were too intellectually and technologically devoid of such advanced thought and capabilities as to be capable of creating this documentation; it is also a method of erasing Indigenous presence on the land.

There are other symbols, much like the petroglyph iconography, that have been in use from ancient times to present day in Native American material culture. Several of these common Native American symbols are shown in the following plate.

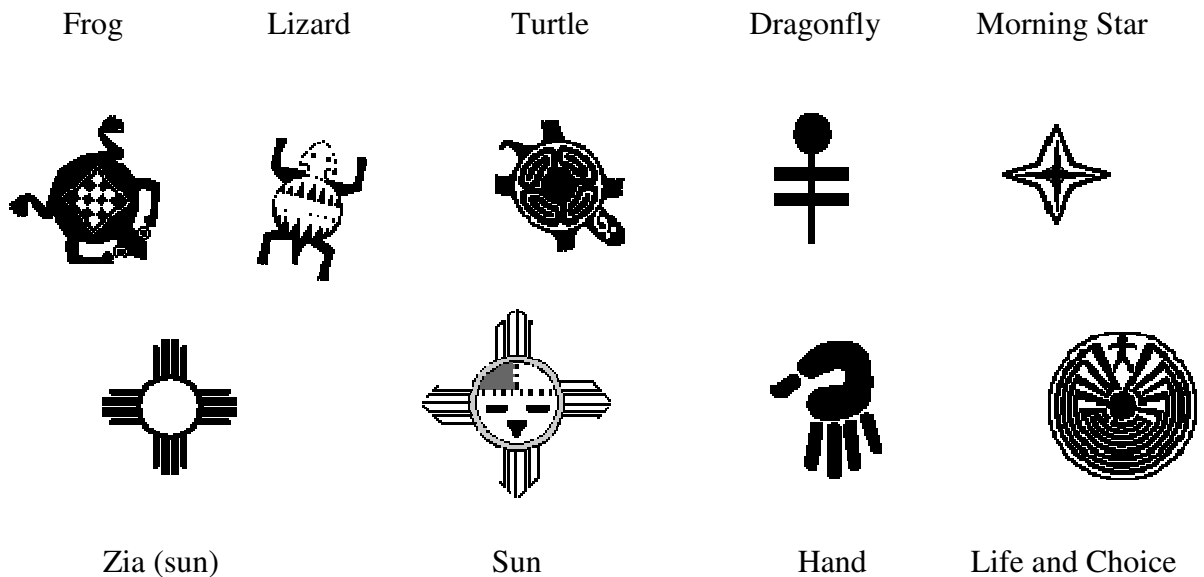


Plate 13 Native American Symbols

[images from: <http://www.kivatrading.com/>]

And, again, many of these symbols have a striking similarity to those found in African

and African American material culture. In comparison to the Ukara Cloth (Plate #4) we again see the symbol of hands along with the use of stars, suns, and animals such as the turtle.

### **B. The Survival of Ancient Meaning in Native America**

Ancient symbols have been passed down, with their meanings, to American Indian artisans producing material culture today. Many traditional members of Native American families, communities, and tribes continue to be the keepers of such knowledge. It is passed to younger members through oral tradition in stories and in ceremonies. The Haudenosaunee people continue to use their wampum belts in Longhouse ceremonies. One can only imagine the shock, or at the very least surprise, that the Iroquois must have felt when they learned that the British, whose allies the Iroquois were during the French and English wars, were ignorant of the writing contained in the wampum belts used during treaty-making!

Indigenous people of the Americas have an ancient tradition of incorporating images of the natural world around them in their material culture including images of creation stories, ceremonies, spiritual life, history, and world-view. The contemporary Plains people of North America are well-known for the beautiful Star Quilts they have been making since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century which connect their ancient stories to the universe and, for some tribes, identifying the stars as their place of origin.

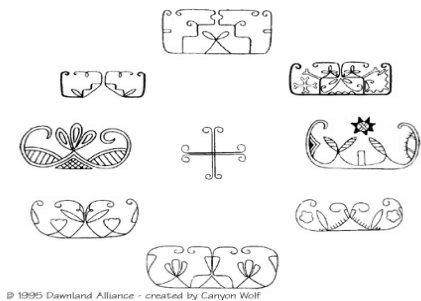




Plate 14 Lakota Star Quilt

[image from: <http://www.d-w-m.org/>]

Much of the fiber work from the northeast tribes makes use of double curve designs. When one looks at these images, the right and left sides of the designs are mirror images of each other which gives the designation of ‘double curve.’ These designs have traditionally been used to decorate clothing, accessories such as bags and hair ornaments, baskets, bedding, animal hides, rattles, and drums. With European invasion in Canada, Christian missionaries were quickly followed by Ursuline nuns who insisted that young Indian girls replace the Native symbology used in embroidery with flowers and vines. Being reluctant to give up ancient symbols of identity, the double curve designs were often incorporated in floral design. The designs today are most often worked in embroidery with wool, thread, dyed porcupine quills, or beads. Each double curve design has a specific meaning. When combined, the designs tell a story or document a history.



© 1995 Dawmland Alliance - created by Canyon Wolf

Plate 15 Double Curve Designs [created by Canyon Wolf]

Many contemporary artists create reproductions of museum pieces. From doing reproduction work, they may move on to creating original designs using motifs that are meaningful to them in combination with ancient symbols. Abenaki bead-worker, Rhonda Besaw, is one such artist. Examples of her work are shown below. Plate #16 is a reproduction bag. Plate #17 is an original design. Rhonda said she created this design (#17) to honor the returning sun and the fiddlehead ferns, one of the first plants of Spring. Plate #18 is another original design. The design of the petroglyphs on one side is imbued with a plethora of symbolism. Rhonda explains the back side in this statement,

The stars are on the other side, so many...Some believe the stars are where our Native ancestors originated and that we will return to the stars when we pass on. The totality of this design signifies physical life on one side, and spiritual life on the other. [personal communication 2010]



Plate 16 Reproduction Bag



Plate 17 Fiddlehead Ferns

[images courtesy of Rhonda Besaw, artist]



Plate 18

Plate 18 Double Sided Bag  
[images courtesy of Rhonda Besaw, artist]

No survey of a Peoples' contemporary material culture would be complete without including paint and canvas. In the painting shown below, we can see how this medium also contributes to the continuance of ancient stories and tradition. This image was painted by my son, Chris Charlebois, as the cover for a book authored by Joe Bruchac. By placing ancient oral stories in print with illustrations, we may meet the criteria established by Europeans as being civilized. And, perhaps a visual aid ascribes anthropological value to oral tradition.



Plate19 Storytelling [courtesy Chris Charlebois]

While I feel that the rest of my life will in some way be an on-going journey through the many threads of the symbology incorporated in the world-view of African and Native American people and their respective material cultures, there is one unanswered question which burns inside of me. The identical symbols below are each found in African cosmology, African Nsibidi, *and* in the Hopi Techqua Ikachi. How could there be an ancient sacred symbol found to be in use in Africa and also found within the ancient Land and Life symbol of a Southwest Indian Tribe in North America?



Plate 20 Identical Symbols

But the Techqua Ikachi is not the only sacred symbol shared by American Indians and African people. As we have seen by the imagery on textiles, other images are also identical in various representations. Symbols of the sun, stars, totem or spiritual animals, crosses, spirals, and hands. Although I've seen no images of hands on Native American material culture, we do know from 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs that hands were one of the images painted for protection on horses of the Plains Indians before going into battle along with images of hail and lightning bolts. Perhaps the answers to these questions lies somewhere in the diffusion/independent invention debate.

## CHAPTER 5

### DIFFUSION OR INDEPENDENT INVENTION

#### A. The Hypotheses

At the end of the previous chapter [p.40], I posed a question relating to the replication of two symbols, the Hopi Techqua Ikachi and a symbol found in the African Nsibidi. The question was, “How could there be an ancient sacred symbol found to be in use in Africa and also found within the ancient Land and Life symbol of a Southwest Indian Tribe in North America?” In looking to the anthropological community for an answer to this question I have found two hypotheses being espoused in all four fields of the discipline; cultural anthropology, archaeology, biological anthropology, and linguistic anthropology.

The hypotheses are labeled ‘diffusion’ and ‘independent invention.’ Diffusion may refer to the migration of humans from a universal point of origin which, over millennia, established global populations. It may also refer to the movement of culture traits through a long distance system of trade or adjacent communities of people. According to Marvin Harris [1971:153], “No matter how much two cultures may diverge from each other, contact between them invariably results in the exchange of some cultural traits.”

Independent invention posits that there were many areas of human global genesis and that language and culture developed in these populations independently of each other. Neither can be empirically proven, which is why I use the term hypotheses rather than theories, but just the simple fact that there is a debate has far-reaching importance for Indigenous peoples of the world.

## **B. The Debate**

In a three part series in *The Atlantic Online* (digital edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*) January 2000 issue, Marc Stengel [2000:2] wrote an article in which he defines those termed ‘diffusionists’ by stating in part,

The Institute for the Study of American Cultures...and their unorthodox inquiries into the pre-Columbian history of the Western Hemisphere, generally known as diffusionist studies, that suppose intentional contact with the Americas by civilizations across both the Pacific and the Atlantic, beginning sometime in the late Stone Age (7000-3000 B.C.).

He continues by identifying ‘independent inventionists’ as “mainstream scholars who regard Western aboriginals as having been essentially free of cross-cultural contamination until 1492.”

Stengel basically identifies the debate as being that of who gets to define the pre-Columbian history of the Americas. But, from an anthropological perspective, isn’t the debate really about the ‘peopling of the Americas?’ Or, perhaps, it is a power struggle between ‘traditional’ academics and academics proposing new lines of inquiry, similar to the struggles between Indigenous communities and archaeologists as defined by Larry Zimmerman [1994:66] when stating, “The problem is control. I sense that...most archaeologists would be reluctant to relinquish control.” Do traditional academics view the diffusionists as a threat to the hierarchy of the discipline?

According to Stengel [2000:4], what the diffusionists adhere to is pre-Columbian intercontinental contact which they believe to be upheld by linguistically connected markings on the landscape; markings such as those found on Guatemalan stone blades dating to 1300 BP which correspond to glyphs from the Shang Dynasty, the ‘Bat Creek

Stone' in Tennessee with markings similar to 2<sup>nd</sup> century Semitic alphabet, and rock carvings in Oklahoma known as the 'Anubis Caves,' identified by Gloria Farley as having centuries-old markings similar to those of Celtic, Iberian, and Phoenician epigraphy. Others substantiate their diffusionist position by evidence such as the discovery of yams, indigenous to the Americas, being present in Polynesia 1600 years ago and images of maize in Indian temples which date to the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries [Stengel, 2000:3].

What continues to be conservatively taught about the peopling of the Americas in Western institutions is the Bering Strait land-bridge theory which posits that no humans inhabited the Americas before about 14,000 years ago when the glacial ice sheets allowed for migration from Asia to North America. This theory has been presented in classes I have attended in Biological Anthropology and Archaeology. I have examined a number of current textbooks which continue to adhere to the Land Bridge theory as the major route of populating North America. I have also had conversation with a Montessori School grade five teacher who was presenting this information to her class until one year ago. The Bering Strait Land Bridge theory would apparently be the orthodox belief system since the 1930s in explaining the peopling of the Americas. However, if this theory holds, then early inhabitants of North America must have very quickly migrated to South America, which would account as the only explanation for evidence of humans in Chile 12,500 years ago in Monte Verde (the archaeological site excavated by Thomas Dillehay beginning in 1977).

What is discounted by diffusionists and independent inventionists is the oral tradition

of Indigenous peoples' creation stories. In *American Antiquity*, Vine Deloria [1992:597] writes, "This migration from Siberia is regarded as doctrine, but basically it is a fictional doctrine that places American Indians outside the realm of planetary human experiences...There's no effort to ask the tribes what they remember of things that happened."

In support of diffusionist hypothesis, Deloria [1992:596] relates a story,

I have in the neighborhood of 80 books dealing in one way or another with Precolumbian expeditions to the Western Hemisphere...These books range from utter nonsense to rather sophisticated and careful review of your own archaeological reports...I began to take this expanding body of literature seriously when I happened to mention Barry Fell's writing to people in the Smithsonian. Before I could even say whether I agreed with Fell or not, William Sturtevant and Ives Goddard got exceedingly heated and began to argue with me about Lybian verb tenses and some translation, or purported translation, of an inscription that Fell had made. My rule of thumb is that the Smithsonian is the last bastion of nineteenth-century science, so if people there are against any new theory, the chances are they are dead wrong.

Another respected Native American scholar who has also posited the diffusionist position is Jack Forbes [1993] in writing *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*. In this book Forbes [1993:7] logically explains the prevailing winds and Gulf Stream currents that would easily enable travel from the Americas to Europe, or from Africa to the Americas. Forbes [1993] also includes in his writing European and Scandinavian accounts from the 1st millennium BP of strange people arriving, or being washed ashore, in kayaks or dug-out canoes. From Las Casas' *Historia*, Forbes [1993:14-15] reports that Columbus noted multi-colored scarves identical with scarves from Sierra Leone (Africa) in Haiti but believed such long-



distance contact was impossible, even though he had been told by these people that, "black people had come from the south and southeast and that their spear heads were made of a brass or bronze-like mixture of gold, silver, and copper."

Ivan Van Sertima [1976] is yet one more scholar whose high-profile book *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* supports the diffusion hypothesis. The beginning of this work by Van Sertima [1976:xiii] was informed by Leo Wiener's linguistic work in the early 20th century which indicated that some Central and South American pre-European invasion languages held linguistic similarities to African and Arabic languages. Van Sertima [1976] built on Wiener's inadequate interpretation of anthropological data. The book examines the intersection of Indigenous American and African material culture including textiles, plants, sculpted images (most notably the Olmec heads), along with navigation and ship-building accounts.

In a personal communication with Robert Paynter [July 14, 2012] the diffusion vs. independent invention debate is succinctly defined. Paynter states,

...diffusionism comes in a strong and weak version. The strong version of diffusionism is that people and cultures are essentially conservative and it is unlikely that major inventions will happen in more than one place on the planet. So good ideas only are invented once and spread out from there. And the weak version of diffusionism which says that people travelled around more than the independent invention folks give them credit for BUT that there are no cultures that are more creative than others...The strong version of independent invention is that culture trait similarities are due to similar cultural conditions...if the conditions aren't right then whether the culture trait arrives by independent invention or diffusion, it won't be picked up. And the weak version of independent invention says people exchange good ideas but they are also terrifically creative on their own and it is hard to sort one from the other.

In thinking about this explanation, I have had to review a number of conversations

which have occurred over years with elders from a variety of Indian Nations in North America and have had to most certainly examine our creation stories. In the creation stories of the northeast we are told that our genesis is where we are situated today. Our oral histories speak of others who came here to visit and explore before European invasion, and of our own people travelling to other lands. There are no stories that I know of that report any specific culture trait that was borrowed from others. However, we do know that maize, for instance, was brought to the northeast through the trade networks. With that consideration, the movement and adoption of culture traits is logical; if a better mousetrap is invented, it would be logical to use it. If culture traits, goods, and food ways spread, why not spiritual thoughts and representations? This is a most complex issue. The strong version of diffusionism would fundamentally suggest a Darwinian hierarchy of intelligence, where a good idea can only be developed by one community of people who must then educate the rest of the world.

### **C. The Out of Africa vs. Multiregionalism Debate**

The diffusion-independent invention debate is similar to the debate in biological anthropology of human origins--the Out of Africa vs. Multiregionalism debate. I have invested many hours of research, reading articles and books on the evolution of modern man, which all appear to be overwhelmingly involved with the finding of one human ancestor (monogenesis). Much of the contemporary literature is focused on an ancestor that migrated out of Africa, but the date of this first migration seems to change on a weekly basis with three major migrations cited [<http://archaeologyinfo.com/homo-sapiens>]. Yet, even with the 'Out of Africa' migration theories, Milford Wolpoff [1988]

and others hold a ‘multiregional’ theory that adheres to multiple global populations at any given time in the history of man. This multiregional theory closely resembles the views held by independent inventionists while the Out of Africa theory holds with the hypothesis of diffusion in the sense of migration and contact.

Patrick Johnson and Scott Bjelland of *The HOMINIDAE Project* write on their website [<http://archaeologyinfo.com/homo-sapiens>],

There are various models which embody combinations of these ideas, different “strict” interpretations of the two theories, etc. Multiregionalists look for similarities between populations in the same geographic location that are separated spatially, while people who follow replacement look for differences...This has led to some fairly severe strife within the paleoanthropological community...For example, multiregionalism is often portrayed as a racist theory that claims different “races” have evolved to different “levels” of intelligence. Out of Africa II has often been portrayed as a religiously motivated idea that tries to come to terms with the biblical story of Genesis, as reference to the “Eve” theory suggests.

What further obscures the monogenesis, or any migration theory for that matter, is the work being done with DNA. The face of migration as to time elements is changing at a rapid pace. The ‘Out of Africa’ model, which refers to a second migration from Africa of a hominid population, states there was a migration of *H. erectus* out of Africa into Asia and Europe but that these populations didn’t contribute a significant amount of genetic material to later populations [<http://archaeologyinfo.com/homo-sapiens>]. The website further states that “approximately 200 kya there was a second migration of hominids out of Africa which were modern *H. sapiens* who replaced those peoples living in Asia and Europe either through extermination, passive replacement, or interbreeding. This hypothesis suggests a single speciation in Africa which precludes any descendency from

Neanderthals or Asian *H. erectus*.

As recently as October of 2012, Ann Gibbons published an article in *Science Magazine* which, once again, calls for an adjustment in human evolution time-lines.

Gibbons [2012:189] writes,

For the past 45 years, researchers have used the number of mutations in DNA like a molecular time clock to date key chapters in the human evolutionary story, such as the dawn of humankind millions of years ago and the exodus of modern humans from Africa in the past 100,000 years.

Gibbons [2012:190] goes on to say that new methods of sequencing human genomes are now used which show mutation rates to more accurately be *half the rate* previously reported. This new process of dating mutations would suggest “that the ancestors of modern humans and Neanderthals diverged about 400,000 to 600,000 years ago, rather than 272,000 to 435,000 years ago.” This also requires a revision in the African migration theory from the previously held 70,000 years to 90,000-130,000 years ago. But, once again, this new information causes controversy and a fix that is little more than a fictional construct. According to Gibbons [2012:190], this new rate

...puts the split of humans and chimpanzees...at between 8.3 million years ago and 10.1 million years ago—far too early given current fossil dates. The split of lineages leading to orangutans and the African apes, including humans, goes back to 34 million to 46 million years ago.

Gibbons [2012:190] reports paleoanthropologist David Begun as saying, “A human-orangutan split at 40 million years is absolutely crazy.” The proposed ‘fix’ is a 30 year old hypothesis that the “mutation rate was faster early in primate evolution, then slowed in African apes, and perhaps slowed even more in human evolution...”

Indigenous peoples of the Americas are again left out of the debate. Evolutionists

would proclaim that there were no primates in the western hemisphere that evolved into the genus *Homo*. All of the theories of evolution ignore the possibility of peoples in the Americas because the data does not support the concept. All of the data relies on fossil evidence for verification and even with the knowledge that the climate and soils that have existed in the Americas are not conducive to preservation of remains eons of years old, without data the possibility is non-existent. So once again, our origins are held hostage by 'scientific' evidence and Indigenous people are not consulted and oral tradition is dismissed as irrelevant.

#### **D. Violence to Indigenous Peoples**

Most of the above hypotheses create violence to Indigenous peoples of the Americas and their communities because each hypothesis, with the possible exception of Wolpoff's multiregional genesis hypothesis, is predicated on an *assumption* of a migration of Indian peoples from some place other than where they were 'discovered' by Europeans. While I find the evolutionary hypotheses and theories interesting, they are in direct conflict with Indigenous creation stories. Our creation stories have not changed for millennia; they tie us to place, to the land, and to our identity. I have incorporated the evolutionist perspective into this chapter for precisely this reason. The theories and hypotheses of evolution are constantly changing; the popular argument between Out of Africa vs. Multiregional hypotheses are in and out of vogue; and, when new DNA research inconveniently changes the timeline, a newly made-up hypothesis which is impossible to prove is created. Our origin and creation stories cannot be proven either, but precisely for this reason, they are discounted and devalued as 'myths' by the scientific community.

There is no fundamental reason why one concept should be credited and the other dismissed. In carefully examining the evolutionist stance, I find very little of 'empirical science' being practiced.

Indigenous peoples live in a world that is defined by relationships. We see a connection between humans and all of creation. We recognize that for every action, there is a reaction that may often have far reaching consequences. If we are traditional, we acknowledge that what we do today will affect our descendants through the next seven generations. We look to our past as a way to understand the present and as a way to inform the future. All of our world is predicated on memory. We depend on our ancient stories, prophecies, language, and collective history to teach our children, and to serve as a reminder, of how to live with others and with all of creation. We depend on memory to carry out and pass on ancient ceremonies that assist in keeping the fragile balance that ensures survival of the Earth. Without this belief, the preservation of all of our culture, ceremony, and knowledge systems would represent time and effort without meaning.

While some may be moved to believe that this knowledge is arcane and unconnected to the world of science, it is, in fact, some of the most ancient scientific knowledge on the planet. In addressing the AISES (American Indian Science and Engineering Society) several years ago, Dr. Henrietta Mann [2007] Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho elder, scholar, and educator stated, and gave me permission to pass on...

American Indians are this country's first scientists, a fact that is often over-looked by contemporary America in general and the scientific community in particular. As indigenous peoples walked through history on their respective cultural roads of life, they formulated sophisticated bodies of traditional knowledge, some points of which converge with mainstream science. They were intimately familiar with their environment

and knew where they stood in the universe. In indigenous thought, life is viewed holistically and for them science is but a strand that is interwoven into a vast, delicately balanced ecological system in which everyone and everything is connected and inter-dependent. For them, science did not stand separate from life.

Indigenous peoples of the Americas were the first botanists, astronomers, medical doctors, agronomists, pharmacists and engineers of their homelands. In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* and in *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour [1993:3] speaks of ‘networks’ and interconnections between humans, the natural world, and the constructed world that humans have created. In the latter he states,

To shuttle back and forth, we rely on the notion of translation, or network. More supple than the notion of system, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity, the idea of network is the Ariadne’s thread of these interwoven stories.” and further [1993:7], ...even the most rationalist ethnographer is perfectly capable of bringing together in a single monograph the myths, ethnohistories, genealogies, political forms, techniques, religions, epics and rites of the people she is studying...you will get a single narrative that *weaves* (emphasis mine) together the way people regard the heavens and their ancestors, the way they build houses and the way they grow yams or manioc or rice, the way they construct their government and their cosmology.

Timothy Pauketat and Lynn Meskell [2010:200-201] in their chapter ‘Changing Theoretical Directions in American Archaeology’ in the book *Voices in American Archaeology* also give voice to the interconnectedness in Indigenous belief systems when they write, “...many peoples recognize putatively inorganic or inanimate objects and unseen forces as living or spiritual entities equal to people, erasing all distinctions between cultural, natural, and supernatural worlds.”

As stated earlier [ch.1, p.9], there are over 700 Indigenous nations in North America.

Each of these nations holds ancient stories that describe their origin; how the universe and Earth were created, how their people were created, and where their point of origin could be found. For many tribes, their creation story places their origins in what is known to be their traditional homeland. David Hurst Thomas [2000:xxii] in *Skull Wars* quotes Armand Minthorn, Umatilla Spiritual leader as saying, “Our oral history goes back 10,000 years. We know how time began and how Indian people were created. They can say whatever they want, the scientists. They are being disrespectful.” Anthropology is defined by James Deetz [1967:3] as “...the study of man in the broadest sense, including his physical, cultural, and psychological aspects, and their interrelationships.” Unfortunately Deetz does not include ‘spiritual’ in this definition, and Indigenous perspective is grounded in the spiritual.

The complexity of this issue is deepened from an Indigenous perspective. For Indigenous people in North America, the diffusionism vs. independent invention paradox is incomplete. The debate diminishes the concept of spiritual interconnectedness. It does not consider that diffusion, independent invention, and *connection* are the *three* essential means of sharing and understanding between ancient peoples and continents. There is no over-arching Indigenous philosophy regarding this debate and the only areas in which Indian people are affected by the potential outcome are in issues of land claims and repatriations, especially when tribes are artificially disconnected from their ancestors by United States judicial systems insisting on 'proof' of relationship to ancestral remains that were living people prior to European invasion. The diffusion vs. independent invention argument also assumes human primacy which is people-centric and antithetical to



traditional Indigenous beliefs of humans occupying a place equal to all other living beings.

## CHAPTER 6

### DECOLONIZING ANTHROPOLOGY

#### A. Anthropology as Colonization

The final pages of the previous chapter, *Diffusion or Independent Invention*, established the foundational necessity for Indigenous anthropologists to be concerned with the current landscape of our discipline. For mainstream anthropologists, it must be evident, as it is to those anthropologists from Indigenous communities, that the academy has provided no space for practitioners who adhere to a traditional world view to fully participate in the discipline in an environment that is collegial, accepting, and nurturing. Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology are not empirical sciences; there does, however, remain more than a few remnants of 19<sup>th</sup> century hegemony within what is considered good scholarship and what is considered to be outside the scope of acceptable systems of knowledge.

Anthropology emerged as an institutional discipline in Europe as an outgrowth of natural history studies during the 17<sup>th</sup> century period of European expansionism and colonization. The studies that originated during this time came from the discovery of ‘the other’ during European invasions of the Americas. Ethnographic studies were conducted of the ‘human primitives’ that were subjected to European programs of imperialistic and colonialistic rule.

Cultural anthropology is a colonized discipline in the sense that it is a *tool* of colonization and colonizing ideology, consciously or not. As the hordes of anthropologists invade Indian reservations and communities every year for ethnographic

field work, a large part of the information gathered is used by entities that provide funding for field studies. A number of these entities are State or Federal government institutions, including the Smithsonian Institution; that huge national vacuum cleaner sucking up physical human remains, material culture, ceremonies and ceremonial objects, along with the languages of Indigenous peoples throughout the world.

In order to navigate the deconstruction and reconstruction of Anthropology, with the goal of decolonizing the discipline, it is important to understand the colonization process. Indigenous peoples need to understand how the erasure of their languages, histories, memories, and sense of place were effected before reclaiming ownership of their systems of knowledge. There are a number of critics who uphold this view; some of these critics are indigenous scholars, some are non-anthropological scholars, and some even are anthropologists.

In *Custer Died for Your Sins* [1969:81] Vine Deloria wrote,

Behind each successful man stands a woman and behind each policy and program with which Indians are plagued, if traced completely back to its origin, stands the anthropologist.

And, on p.78,

Into each life, it is said, some rain must fall. Some people have bad horoscopes, others take tips on the stock market...Churches possess the real world. But Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists.

This recurring theme of Deloria's speaks of the social, political, and economic ways in which anthropological study has contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. As the colonizers appropriated land and resources, so too have anthropologists

and the discipline appropriated Indigenous knowledge systems, and rewritten those knowledge systems from a colonial Euro-American perspective.

Walter D. Mignolo [2003] in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* explores the many, sometimes subtle or covert, facets of the colonizing process. He speaks of the ways in which people, lands, and resources are colonized by writing of the ‘Colonization of Memory,’ the ‘Colonization of History,’ the ‘Colonization of Language,’ and the ‘Colonization of Space.’ A major focus of Mignolo’s work is built on the ways in which knowledge is colonized. All of these forms of colonization have not only served to oppress, subjugate, and dominate Indigenous people, they have also served to create a Euro-centric hubris in intellectual and academic institutions and in some who practice in these arenas. *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* deals with takings of land, resources, languages, and histories; but it also addresses the taking of Indigenous knowledge.

In an article, ‘Representing the Colonized’ for *Critical Inquiry*, Edward Said [1989:220] writes,

The native point of view, despite the way it has often been portrayed, is not an ethnographic fact only, is not a hermeneutical construct primarily or even principally; it is in large measure a continuing, protracted, and sustained adversarial resistance to the discipline and the praxis of anthropology (as representative of “outside” power) itself, anthropology not as textuality but as an often direct agent of political dominance.

The violence Indigenous communities suffer through the practice of anthropology and some non-native anthropologists is embodied in many forms. Even before Deloria’s 1969 writing of *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Lévi-Strauss [1966:126] identified anthropology as a colonizing instrument and as a perpetrator of violence against

Indigenous people in an article for *Current Anthropology*.

Anthropology is the outcome of an historical process, which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered, their institutions and beliefs destroyed while they themselves were ruthlessly killed, thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist. Anthropology is the daughter to this era of violence.

Political, social, and economic subjugation of the colonized by the colonizer is accomplished through erasure of group history and devaluation of oral tradition, enforced use of the dominant language and religion, and disconnection and/or removal from ancestral lands and resources. As new histories are written, ethnographies documented, and anthropological studies conducted, a Westernized construct of the colonized peoples is developed. Histories are written from the perspective of the colonizer's view of the normal (that being the hegemonic perspective), and ethnographic studies and anthropological analyses are conducted through a Euro-American lens.

The process of decolonization is not an easy or comfortable task. Before we can attain a space of decolonization, we have to navigate deconstruction and reconstruction—decolonization is the end result, not the beginning of the process.

I have chosen to reinterpret Audre Lorde's [1984:110] essay title from her book *Sister Outsider* and now famous quote, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." I believe that the only method of creating space within the academy that will allow for an Indigenous approach to anthropology, *by Indigenous anthropologists*, is through the use of 'the master's tools;' to learn and understand the theory and method of anthropological research as a means to reclaim our own histories, stories, languages, and

interpretations of our material culture and, in the process of learning, to rewrite (again) our histories, stories, languages, and material culture interpretations.

Adherents to the practice of anthropology from a hegemonic position are resistant to allowing space for Indigenous approaches to the discipline, especially those who are attached to post-colonial theory. Bagele Chilisa [2012:49] speaks of Indigenous scholars such as Sandy Grande [2000] and G.H. Smith [2000], who posit,

Post-colonial theory can easily become a strategy for Western researchers to perpetuate control over research related to indigenous peoples and the colonized Other in general, while at the same time ignoring their concerns and ways of knowing.

The central point in this argument is that post-colonial theory comes from critical theory, a Western tradition that emphasizes “individuality, secularization, and mind-body duality [Grande, 2000].” This approach is in direct opposition to Indigenous values and concepts such as family, humility, spirituality, and sovereignty.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999:98] takes issue with, and writes about, the term post-colonial,

New analyses and a new language mark, and mask, the ‘something’ that is no longer called imperialism. For indigenous peoples, one term that has signaled the striking shift in discourse is ‘post-colonial.’ Naming the world as ‘post-colonial’ is, from indigenous perspectives, to name colonialism as finished business. In Bobby Sykes’s cryptic comment post-colonial can mean only one thing: the colonizers have left.

And, Bagele Chilisa [2012:11] states, “Postcolonial indigenous research methodologies must be informed by the resistance to Euro-Western thought and the further appropriation of their knowledge.”

## **B. Decolonizing Anthropology**

When Europeans ‘discovered’ the Americas, the peoples indigenous to the New World were considered uncivilized because they held no alphabetic system of writing. To the initiated, the designs and symbols used on material culture held meaning and were often used as a form of non-verbal communication. Many of those ancient symbols continue to be used in the material culture of today and the interpretation of them has been passed orally from generation to generation.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999:28] in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* references Albert Memmi [1991] by stating,

The fact that indigenous societies had their own systems of order was dismissed through what Albert Memmi referred to as a series of negations: they were not fully human, they were not civilized enough to have systems, they were not literate, their languages and modes of thought were inadequate.

Mignolo [2003:125-170] speaks of writing histories of people without history. This is in reference to the European belief that only history recorded by alphabetic writing was accurate, that those populations who used symbols, iconography, and pictograms were uncivilized and incapable of recording their own history. In this context, European colonizers wrote their history for them, beginning with colonization; any temporal/spatial events that preceded colonization were ‘prehistoric’ events. Mignolo [2003:126] deals with “alternate forms of writing, recording, and transmitting the past in ways that allow for a reframing of the debate on fiction, literature, and history within the context of literacy, colonization, and the writing of histories of people without histories.” He references Edouard Glissant on p.126 by stating, “For Glissant history and literature were

just instruments of the Western empire to suppress and subjugate other forms of recording the past and of finding means of interaction for which literature became the paradigm.”

Giambattista Vico was an early recorder (18<sup>th</sup> century) about whom Mignolo [2003:145] writes. Vico postulates three ages of man in a universal history of mankind, each with its own language. The first is the age of gods with hieroglyphics representing a form of language, the second is the age of heroes with signs and heroic enterprises, and the third is the age of men, or human, with alphabetic writing. From this model, Vico determined that a civil history was possible with each nation writing its own history using the ‘language’ of the period. This premise certainly seems like an early form of social Darwinism. In any case, Vico held a belief that writing developed before language.

Building on Vico, Bernardo Boturini Benaducci [Mignolo 2003:143-165] developed a new concept of history and historiographical writing in 1749 following a protracted journey to Mexico. Boturini concluded that the Amerindians had their own forms of writing prior to European invasion, and that utilization of these writings recorded their histories prior to 1492. Based on the three ages set forth by Vico, Boturini determined that every human community had its own way of recording the past and that alphabetic writing in relationship to recording history was an invention of the West. Even with all of his work in developing this concept and understanding the various methods used in the ‘New World’ for recording history, Boturini still had difficulties avoiding incorporating his own experiences, worldview, and cultural past into his analysis. There still existed overlays of the Christian belief system and writing the Amerindian past into a universal



history written from a European perspective. However, he was clear that no one model of a universal history is more accurate than any other.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999] presents fundamental ideas which are related to understandings of being human and of how humans relate to the world. For Indigenous peoples, beliefs are carried and preserved in stories and memories, and they are embedded in Indigenous languages.

Smith [1999:144] references Foucault's [1969] *Archaeology of Knowledge*. In speaking of the cultural archive, Foucault states that the archive is the 'general system of the formation and transformation of statements.' Within this 'archive' are all of the rules of imparting knowledge, philosophy, and definitions of human nature—from a *Western perspective*. In the 'formation and transformation' of statements, power structures are developed and utilized in the oppression and colonization of nations and communities. Archives of 'recorded' histories from the lens of the colonizer are kept in order to maintain a fictional construct of literary supremacy which negates any possibility of negotiating power relations and/or privilege. Foucault also suggests that the archive contains the 'rules of practice' for which there is no Western definition because they are taken for granted. Smith [1999] writes that Indigenous people can define the rules of practice because they have been the objects of that practice.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies* [1999:28], Linda Tuhiwai Smith addresses the issue of writing and history from an Indigenous perspective,

It is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying. The sense of history conveyed by these approaches

is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other.

In oral traditions there are many forms in which history, memory, and meaning is passed from generation to generation—pictographs, verbal stories, songs, ideograms, and ceremony. When our histories are written by those who have no experience of sharing in them, we can view those histories as being colonized.

Smith [1999:56] writes of ‘Research Through Imperial Eyes’ as describing “an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, or reality, of social life, and of human beings.” To Indigenous people this concept is one of the world being turned upside down; it represents a foreign notion that is far removed from our own reality, and an idea that serves only to divorce us from our memories.

In another Mignolo [2003:171-216] article, “Genres as Social Practices: Histories, *Enkyclopaideias*, and the Limits of Knowledge and Understanding,” the author speaks of Sahagún’s Florentine Codex. Mignolo [2003:209] writes,

Sahagún was concerned with rhetoric, oratory, and ethics when collecting and organizing the material for book 6 of the Florentine Codex...*elders were respected as the repository of knowledge and source of wisdom. During the Renaissance, alphabetic writing and books replaced the ‘men of wisdom.’* [emphasis added]

The colonization of our memories happened when our histories were questioned and ‘corrected,’ or when our spiritual beliefs were supplanted by forced Christianity, when our landscape was forever changed, when place names were changed, when our

ceremonies and our languages were forbidden. These are things which have been taken away and forever changed. What the Europeans coopted from us was the right to keep our memories because retention of memory presents a danger to the colonizer, memory ensures that our identities as a separate, non-colonized people remain intact. Renewal of memory may be the first step to decolonization, the first step to decolonizing the discipline of anthropology, and the first step to reconstructing anthropology from an Indigenous perspective.

### **C. A Return to Balance**

Indigenous Research Methodologies is a praxis that may be taught to Indigenous anthropologists and practiced in the field. Bagele Chilisa [2012:25] makes reference to Homi Bhabha [1994] and the concept of Third-Space Methodologies, or “the space-in-between.” Bhabha is quoted as writing “...Western research paradigms are contested and declared invalid because they are based on a culture that has been made static and essentialized.” Chilisa [2012:25] goes on to say in reference to Euro-Western Research Paradigms,

Knowledge of the dominant Euro-Western research paradigms is necessary to enable you to contextualize a critique of these research methodologies as well as appreciate the decolonization and indigenization of these research approaches.

Diane Lewis [1973:590] wrote, “Development of a methodology whereby insiders study their own culture...should help bring about the ‘decolonization’ of the social sciences...” and Lévi-Strauss [1966:126] stated that,

...the first concern of people made aware of their independent existence and originality must be to claim the right to observe their culture themselves, from the inside. Anthropology will survive in a changing

world by allowing itself to perish in order to be born again under a new guise.

This is no small task for Indian people. Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999:71] paraphrases Gayatri Spivak [1990] by writing,

Third World intellectuals have to position themselves strategically as intellectuals within the academy, within the Third World or indigenous world, and within the Western world in which many intellectuals actually work. The problem, she argues, for Third World intellectuals remains the problem of being taken seriously.

Breaching the walls of the academy is only one hurdle; an Indigenous academic must also navigate those in the community who hold a deep-seated suspicion of community members who accomplish advanced education, even when the community values education. There is often a concern that the community scholar will become too ‘westernized,’ too ‘white,’ that they will move away from traditional ways and ideologies, from family and community; basically that they have ‘gone over to the dark side.’ But even with these concerns, the Indigenous anthropologist will be invested with a higher degree of community trust than a non-Native anthropologist. Awareness of this last statement may cause an even deeper alienation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Anthropologists and may contribute to the objective outsider vs. insider binary; the belief that one loses objectivity in one’s own community, but from an Indigenous perspective, everything is connected, everything is relational.

Shawn Wilson [2008:56] explains an Indigenous relational paradigm by quoting Evelyn Steinhauer [2002] who, in turn, is quoting Stan Wilson [2001:177].

One major difference between those dominant paradigms and an Indigenous paradigm is that those dominant paradigms build on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity: the researcher

is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained, and therefore, knowledge may be owned by an individual. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all creation...It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge...you are answerable to *all* your relations when you are doing research.

This is the beginning of the understanding of an Indigenous approach to anthropological research and analysis.

Diane Lewis [1973:585-586] has this to say about the anthropologist as an ‘objective outsider,’

For both the colonizer and the detached observer, objectification through depersonalization devalues the individual; the individual, preoccupied with problems the observer refuses to acknowledge, is ignored.

And, “Objectivity is considered by many nonwhite people an affront.”

Margaret Kovach [2009:19] in *Indigenous Methodologies* posits that “Indigenous communities, whose members have a huge stake in ensuring that research is conducted in a respectful way that honours and upholds tribal paradigms” would have an interest in an Indigenous anthropology that honors both members and traditional knowledge. And Mignolo [2002:64] writes that “Intellectual decolonization...cannot come from existing philosophies and cultures of scholarship.” Indigenous people believe that knowledge comes to us from Creator, from the Universe, from our Ancestors, and not from the world where knowledge is concentrated and held by those with a perception of power.

In Indigenous world-view, our physical and spiritual lives must be in balance with all of the natural world around us as well as all that is contained in the universe. When there

is an imbalance in any area, all others are negatively affected. Our world has been out of balance since the first days of European colonization: lives and lands have been stolen; degradation of the Earth and her resources; subjugation and oppression of communities; and knowledges removed, misinterpreted, misunderstood, and disrespected. Retrieving our traditional knowledge and reclaiming control of how that knowledge is understood and used will begin the healing process of communities. Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999:37] states,

The concept of imagination, when employed as a sociological tool, is often reduced to a way of seeing and understanding the world, or a way of understanding how people either construct the world or are constructed by the world.

Mignolo [2002:63] invokes Pletsch [1981] in defining the ‘colonial difference’ as

...the difference between center and periphery, between the Eurocentric critique of Eurocentris and knowledge production by those who participated in building the modern/colonial world and those who have been left out of the discussion.

He expands on this definition of ‘colonial difference’ by referencing Vine Deloria [1972],

...reflections on space and time (sacred places and abstract and symbolic time) touch on and make visible the irreducible colonial difference that Dussel emphasizes in his philosophy of liberation. In both Deloria and Dussel there is a need to establish the limits of Western cosmologies. [Mignolo 2002:67]

and he goes on to say that for liberals, conservatives, and socialists as secular political ideologies, all within the same frame of Christianity, “time and history are the essence of their cosmology.” [Mignolo 2002:71] Mignolo then states that border thinking is “an epistemology from a subaltern perspective,” and that border thinking is created by the

colonial difference. When Indigenous scholars work toward the decolonization of a discipline, they are certainly thinking from the periphery, the border, and developing an epistemology from a ‘subaltern perspective.’

The decolonization process begins with rediscovery and recovery. Bagele Chilisa [2012:15] states that,

...this refers to the process where the colonized Other rediscover and recover their own history, culture, language, and identity. It involves a process of interrogating the captive mind so that the colonized Other and the historically oppressed...can come to define in their own terms what is real to them. They can also define their own rules on what can be known and what can be spoken, written about, how, when, and where.

Diane Lewis [1973:586] writes,

Anthropology...must redefine traditional roles. It should now include, on an equal footing, those who reflect the interests of the people among whom they work, along with those who represent the government in power; insiders, in addition to outsiders.

Lewis wrote those words almost 40 years ago. While Vine Deloria’s [1969] writing in *Custer Died for Your Sins* elicited powerful (positive and negative) responses from the academy, Lewis’ writing seems to have been largely ignored. I suppose, if we were being kind, we could simply attribute this to the fact that the academic world of anthropology in 1973 was even more of a male dominated discipline than it is today and that Diane Lewis was simply ahead of her time. However, as Edward Said [1989:225] stated, “Perhaps anthropology as we have known it can only continue on one side of the imperial divide, there to remain as a partner in domination and hegemony.”

If Said’s statement is true, then anthropology will become one of the many manifestations of colonial failure. All people want to be free. Indigenous peoples view

themselves as sovereign beings and, as such, are free. As more and more Indigenous people join the scholarly ranks, the truth of our histories will be written. A very wise woman, who I hold in high esteem and respect, once said (in reference to writing 'truth'), "The truth doesn't always set you free." I believe that what she meant by that statement was that in the academic world, speaking the truth from a subaltern position can guarantee professional death. My response to her was, "Maybe the truth won't set you free, but it will allow you to sleep well and to have a good death." Through Indian eyes, that is a good thing.

Researching, writing, and thinking about the findings in this thesis did not answer my question on p.40 and repeated on p.41. There was no definitive answer found as to why the exact symbol exists pre-European contact in the southwestern United States and in Africa. But in examining the diffusionism vs. independent invention debate, I did gain a broader and deeper understanding of the questions anthropologists ask, how they process those questions intellectually, and why they are concerned with the answers to the questions. Most importantly, examining these processes has assisted me in recognizing how the approach by Indigenous anthropologists contrasts to that taken by mainstream anthropologists. There is a very fundamental difference in the two approaches which is a direct manifestation of the difference in world-views.

In order to answer the questions surrounding the similarities and sometimes exact replications of Native American and African symbology, we need to examine Indigenous belief systems. Signs and symbols are not the only commonality between these two groups of Indigenous peoples. They each possess early, pre-European, contact stories.



Forbes [1993:6] repeats one such story from Guyana "...in which Nyan, an African sky-spirit, along with the African earth-mother, the African river-mother, and Anancy the Spider-trickster met the Great Spirit, the Father Sun, and other spirit-powers of the Americans."

Native Americans and Africans each traditionally use red ochre. Michael Balter has written an article [2013:643] about the Blombos Cave in South Africa where a block of red ochre with heavily etched decoration dating to 77,000 BP has been recovered and identified as the first possible example of human art in the world. To carry similarities a step further, burial practices of the Algonquian Indians in the northeastern United States and those of the Neolithic peoples of •atalh•yük in central Turkey as described by Ian Hodder [2006] are nearly identical, even to the use of red ochre with the ancient burials.

Explanations for these similarities can be found in examining Native American fundamental spiritual beliefs. "In the beginning, Creator gave all peoples of the Earth original instructions. These instructions taught us how to pray, how to honor all things, how to live with each other and with the rest of all Creation." This is a satisfactory explanation from an Indigenous perspective: logically those original instructions between global peoples may over-lap in a number of instances; logically the understandings, interpretations, and physical manifestations of those instructions could be similar. Whether one ascribes this to diffusion, independent invention, or my third suggestion of an over-arching notion of spiritual connectedness is less important to understand than *seeing* as Indigenous peoples of Africa, the Americas, and the rest of the world do--that there are ancient and continuing connections which are reflected in our iconography, art,

culture, and traditions.

Essentially, the debate and which side is correct does not define what makes us human and does not represent a concern of primacy in Indian thought. Indians are not asking these questions; these questions are being asked and answered by the on-going keepers of the colonial archives who have little, if any, interest in the Native American perspective of origins, history, and interconnectedness of Earth's peoples. To repeat an earlier quote by Vine Deloria [1992:597]. "There's no effort to ask the tribes what they remember of things that happened."

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

When I began formulating my ideas for the thesis for my Master's degree in Cultural Anthropology, I naively believed I would have a narrow focus of study, that I would be examining only the symbols found on the material culture of Indigenous people in the Americas and in Africa. I had somehow lost sight of my own world view and Indigenous belief system that centers on the interconnectedness of all things. This awareness and core belief began to return to me as I progressed through courses of study. I realized through the writing of papers for my graduate courses that all I had learned was intricately connected; that they contributed to and strengthened my thesis.

In the introduction to this thesis, I identified what led me to this particular topic and the subsequent lines of inquiry. Initially, an interest and curiosity in symbols used in ancient (pre-European contact) Native American and African material culture especially focusing on textiles. From that interest, I became curious as to the similarities in some of the symbols between peoples who were geographically far removed from each other. The primary question which developed from that line of study was whether the similarities were a consequence of separate invention or cultural contact. I looked to Anthropology for an answer to this question which led me to an examination of a long-standing debate within the discipline: diffusion vs. independent invention. I am unable to give a definitive answer to the question of the origin of the similarities of these symbols, but feel I'm in good company as no one else can answer that question either. In any case, I believe my examination of the literature thus far has suggested ancient contact between

the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and those of Africa. This position is substantiated from oral traditions of Indigenous Americans and Africans.

In hearing the many voices of scholars who have written about colonization, imperialism, racism, marginalization, exploitation, and the ways in which all of this has been accomplished, it is obvious to me that there is a connection between these conditions and the absence of Indigenous history and memory in Western systems of knowledge. It should also be obvious that, as Bob Dylan sings, ‘the times they are a-changin’.’ The ‘subaltern voices’ are beginning to speak. This fact is evident on a global scale as people once again take to the streets to protest subjugation, inequalities, genocide, and marginalization.

Indigenous people in the Americas are gaining advanced degrees in unprecedented numbers. It is inevitable that practitioners in all fields of anthropology will become aware of the fact that an Indigenous Method and Theory in praxis has enormous benefit to gaining knowledge and understanding. The only alternative to making space within the discipline for a new approach is that Indigenous Anthropologists will be the academics who are writing new interpretations, breaking new ground, and imparting new knowledge. It is *inevitable* that mainstream anthropologists will recognize, and *value*, the traditional knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples; even those that appear to be based in spiritual belief systems. Oral tradition is centered in first-hand accounts of history and ways of knowing. To discard and disregard these systems is not science; it is another form of genocide. Indian people are patient, we’ve waited for over 500 years; the waiting time is now past and we must move forward.

I am confident that I accomplished the task I proposed for this thesis. However, I know the subject is not closed. I have more in-depth reading to do of the books I have read only one time and there are more books waiting to be examined. I expect this thesis will be greatly expanded and will inform my PhD dissertation. I am anxious to begin the rest of the journey.

As a final note, I wish to state that as I have endeavored for many years to honor my Indian ancestors and have answered their (often loud) calls to the very specific task of repatriation, I must also honor my (perhaps) more distant African Ancestors and their quieter calls to me for acknowledgement; Barbara Correa is one of those voices, born (1711) in the Azore Islands of an Azorean father and an African mother. Another is Victoria da Camara, a captive African enslaved by Captain Ignacio Manuel de Medeiros and her daughter Suzana Francisca de Amaral. And, Francisca born into captivity in 1754 to Elena de Medeiros, an enslaved woman of Captain Antonio de Medeiros. All four who are my grandmothers. I dedicate this, and all of what I do, to those who came before me; to those who sacrificed much, sometimes their very lives, in order for me to be here, on this Earth, in this place, and in this time. Their sacrifice is what compels me to learn, to share, to hold the traditions and knowledge close, and to protect their resting places and the sacred spaces in which they did ceremony, spaces in which their Spirits still live. It is for these past African ancestors, American Indian ancestors, and for future descendants that I examine these topics because I truly do believe that the truth will set us free.

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