

Frequently Asked Questions: American Indians and Native Cultures

What's appropriate terminology—Indian? American Indian? Native American?

Columbus, believing he had reached the East Indies, called the people he encountered los Indios, sometimes translated as "people of color," or, more often, as "Indian." The people he encountered were very spiritual and the phrase 'los Indios' in Spanish means 'The People of God'. Because of stereotypes associated with the word Indian, it fell out of favor for a time, but has since been reclaimed by many Native people. The term Native American came into use in the 1960s to refer to American Indians and Alaska Natives. According to the 2000 Census, more than four million people of Native ancestry are living in the United States. The Native population in Canada, which is growing at almost twice the rate of the overall population, accounts for about three percent of all Canadians, or nearly 800,000 people.

Who is an American Indian? What is a tribe?

The most basic answer is that an Indian is a person who 1) has Native ancestors and 2) is recognized by his or her tribe or community. The U.S. federal government considers someone American Indian if he or she belongs to a state- or federally recognized tribe. Tribal governments formally list their members, who must meet specific criteria for enrollment. There are millions of people with Indian ancestry, but this does not necessarily make them American Indian in the eyes of tribes or the federal government. Individual tribes have the right to determine their own membership. An Indian tribe is generally an ethnologically similar group of Native people who also exist, in a legal and political sense, as a community. The U.S. federal government's recognition of particular groups of Indians as political entities, or Indian tribes, was recognized by the Articles of Confederation in 1777, and has been enshrined in the Constitution since it was ratified in 1788.

How many tribes are in the U.S.?

As of 2004, there are 562 federally recognized tribes and 175 non-federally recognized tribes in the United States, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This includes 226 Native villages in Alaska that were recognized by the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Federal recognition acknowledges the federal-trust relationship between a tribe and the United States, and from this relationship comes certain services, such as health, education, and economic development programs.

What is an Indian reservation?

A reservation is an area of land "reserved" by the federal government as a permanent tribal homeland. There are 314 reservations located in 48 states. The largest is the Navajo reservation, which covers 16 million acres of land in Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado. Reservations include Indian pueblos, rancherias, communities, and colonies where the land base is held in trust or protected by the federal government. California's rancherias are among the smallest of reservations; some are only an acre or so in size. More than 60 percent live away from reservations in urban and rural areas.

Do most American Indians live on reservations?

No. More than 60 percent live away from reservations in urban and rural areas.

How many American Indian languages are there?

Of the estimated 300 Native languages that existed in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans, approximately 175 are still spoken today. Linguists predict that of these, more than 80% will stop being used within the next generation. The vast majority of North American Indians speak English as their main language. In Latin America, there are several hundred indigenous languages still spoken by millions of Native people.

What's a powwow?

Powwow comes from a Narragansett word that referred to curing ceremonies. It has come to mean a celebration and social gathering that honors Indian traditions through dancing, drumming, and singing. Although powwows may be held to honor an individual or to mark a special occasion, they are most commonly social events, often with drumming and dancing competitions.

What is the legal relationship between tribes and the U.S. government?

The relationship between the tribes and the United States is one of government-to-government. The concept of tribal sovereignty, which has shaped the entire history of dealings between the federal government and the tribes, is lodged in the U.S. Constitution. Three U.S. Supreme Court opinions were very important in shaping Indian law: *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823), *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831), and *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832). These cases recognized the sovereignty of the Indian tribes, but noted that the tribes' sovereignty was "necessarily diminished" by their dependency on the United States. Indians' rights to their homelands came second to the rights of the Europeans who "discovered" the land. Indian tribes were described as "domestic dependent nations," with the federal-tribal relationship like that of a "ward to his guardian." Native Hawaiians are U.S. citizens, but the federal government has not recognized their sovereign status as a group, as it has for Alaska Natives and Indian tribes.

Are Native Americans citizens of the U.S.?

American Indians and Alaska Natives are citizens of the United States and the states in which they reside. They are also citizens of the tribes to which they belong, according to the criteria established by each tribe. Until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, Indians occupied an unusual status under federal law. Some had acquired citizenship by marrying white men. Others received citizenship through military service, by receipt of allotments, or through special treaties or statutes. But many were still not citizens, and they were barred from the ordinary processes of naturalization open to foreigners. In 1924, Congress granted citizenship to all Native Americans born in the United States. This was not a response to some universal petition by American Indian groups, but a move by the federal government to absorb Indians, earlier described as "wards" of the government, into the mainstream of American life.

What are treaties?

From 1785 to 1871, U.S. relations with individual Indian nations were conducted through treaty negotiations. These treaties, or contracts, transferred and created a unique set of rights for the benefit of each of the treaty-making tribes. The hundreds of treaties signed with American Indian tribes and ratified by Congress usually enabled the government to gain rights to Indian

land. At least another 45 treaties were negotiated with tribes but never ratified. Even so, some of the unratified treaties took legal effect. Because the treaty-making era ended in 1871, not all tribes have a treaty.

Is there an American Indian religion?

In the 19th century, American Indians lost many of their religious customs when they were forced to convert to Christianity and send their children to mission schools, and banned from their ceremonies. Many Native people today practice Christianity, many others observe their cultures' traditional religions, and still others do both. A large number of American Indians believe in a Great Spirit that reveals itself through nature and influences all life. There is also a religion known as the Native American Church (N.A.C.), which emphasizes spiritual power and connection, brotherly love, fidelity, and self-discipline through insights gained by the ritualized use of peyote, a natural hallucinogen. Officially recognized in the early 20th century, N.A.C.'s membership today is estimated at 250,000.

What is meant by Indian stereotype?

Inauthentic, unrealistic, and offensive images of Indians have been used to sell everything from butter to tobacco to cars, and have served—or continue to serve—as mascots for sports teams. Despite efforts to correct or cease the use of stereotypes, distorted imagery and misinformation about Native peoples still abound. Stereotypes are often the result of gross oversimplifications of real traditions or lifeways. Many people hear the words Indian or Native American and picture a Hollywood version of Pocahontas, or a "brave" decked out in feathers and wielding a tomahawk, or a beautiful and innocent "primitive" living in touch with nature. Native Americans are frequently spoken of in the past tense, yet in the U.S. today there are millions of Native people from hundreds of nations, all with rich and varied histories, languages, and cultures. There are many good websites that address stereotypes and misconceptions about Native people; two of these are <http://www.hanksville.org/sand/stereotypes> and <http://www.bluecorncomics.com/stereotype.htm>.

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