

Change in American Indian World Views Illustrated by Oral Narratives and Contemporary Poetry

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Unlike other ethnic groups, American Indians had little to celebrate during the bicentennial year in 1976. Other ethnic groups, with the exception of blacks and Mexican Americans, came to America to find a better way of life.¹ In contrast, few American Indians have left this country in search of a better life elsewhere. Hence, being an oppressed minority in a society governed by Western thought and values, Indians can only lament the loss of their rights to live and govern their lives according to particular religious, cultural, and social values, for they have been forced to change world views and way of life under both the overt and covert pressures of Euroamerican society.

There are various means through which one can illustrate this change. An outstanding example may be seen through a comparison of past oral narratives, that is, songs, chants, and prayers, with the contemporary poetry of American Indians.² This article examines the transition from native oral narratives to current Western-style poetry, which clearly expresses the forced change in the lives of a conquered people. This change involves the beliefs, practices, religion, language, essentially the entire way of life and world view of a people whose culture and society was at one time strong and stable. Such changes in the culture of the native people resulted in changes in the older form of oral narratives and led to the creation of poetry in the Western tradition, primarily protest poetry.

Most of what is purported by editors and anthologists to be Indian poetry is in fact songs, chants or prayers, in essence, oral narratives in an age old tradition. These forms of oral narratives were not intended to be poetic nor were they intended to be used in the written form. The term "poetry" and even the Western concept of poetry was unknown in past traditional Indian societies.³

The term "poetry" denotes the expression of an idea or ideas in a traditionally structured form.⁴ The oral tradition as practiced by early American Indians also employed structured traditional form.⁵ However, "poetry" as the term is used in Western literature is the product of a single poet who employs the form to express individual ideas and emotions. A poet seeks immortality. Consequently, in Western literature scholars seek to learn the authorship of unattributed poems, which results in many people knowing the names of famous poets even though they could not quote a single poem by them.

Anthologists fail to recognize the difference between the poem as artifact and the narrative which is at once an expression of community belief and a sacred offering. The importance of an American Indian chant is not that so and so reads or even sings it but that the chant works; it is not a cultural adornment but a functional part of life. The chant attains its highest power only in the context of life, of immediate needs or joys, and is therefore stripped of much of its value and intensity when it is reduced merely to a pattern of words upon a page. If such a definition is applied to the native oral narratives, the nature and significance of their meaning becomes misleading. Whether it has been intentional or unintentional, the fact remains that anthologists in general have not recognized a totally different world view as valid and acceptable because of its narrative form, that is, in comparison to Western literary tradition. Therefore, in an attempt to equate early American Indian narratives with those of the Western tradition, old traditional ceremonial and religious orations have often been mislabeled as poetry. The ramification of this particular practice is that the older forms of oral narratives have generally been arranged by Western editors and anthologists in a condescending manner, i.e., in a sincere attempt to assign narrative structural eloquence to these traditional verbal art forms, scholars have categorized and published them as poems in a Western literary form.

The problem is further complicated by the way in which the works appear in translation. Translating poetry is always difficult. Translating it from the language of one culture into that of an entirely different culture is even more difficult, for the very syntactical patterns which convey meaning in English at times violate the spirit of other cultures. For example, it is highly doubtful that an old Indian practitioner of the verbal arts would have used such a phrase as, "Thou didst tell me before."⁶ This phraseology is representative of Western syntactical structure.

Indian songs, chants, and prayers have always been functional and operational. They stand on their own eloquence within their own context. The oral narratives were created to live as a part of life. These Indian orations address life and work with it. The people feel these words, and their lives rely upon them. The words are an expression of the inward self, the self of being — emanating from the heart and soul, from the body and flesh. Words are of body and soul. These chants, prayers, and songs tie the people to other forms of life — spiritual, animate, and inanimate. Traditional Indians utter chants to all the heavenly bodies upon rising and retiring, they have songs for deer and bear hunting, for growing and harvesting corn, as well as those songs which are uttered while crossing treacherous waters. Such songs are bonds between humans and the other forms of life. These forms of Indian oral expression are significant. Eloquent orations such as these have been appropriately cited by noted anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict who says that among the Zuni, “Their prayers also are formulas, the effectiveness of which comes from their faithful rendition.”⁷ Three examples of the old oral narratives provide insight.

Sacred is the act by which my hands are browned,
It is the act by which I offer my prayer.

Sacred is the act by which my hands are blackened,
It is the act by which I offer my prayer.

Sacred is the act by which my face is blackened,
It is the act by which I offer my prayer.

Sacred is the light of day that falls upon my face,
The day on which my prayers are finished.⁸

This is an example of a song which has great significance in the Indians’ cognitive view but has been entered into a book carrying the subtitle, *Poetry of the American Indians*.⁹

The following example of an old traditional North American narrative is recognized as being what it is by current editors who are sensitive to the significance of the oral narratives in traditional Inuit (Eskimo) life.

We reach out our hands
to help you up;
We are without food,
we are without game.
From the hollow by the entrance
you shall open,
you shall bore your way up.
We are without food,
and we lay ourselves down
holding out hands
to help you up.¹⁰

The significance of this ritual narrative is that it graphically depicts the importance of its use as part of the Inuit belief system, i.e., it is a traditionally institutionalized verbal vehicle used to call upon the spirits of the undersea world to help them secure the food to maintain their lives.

The following narrative existed in the 19th century and is still being used by the Navajo people.

It was the wind that gave them life. It was the wind that comes out of our mouths now that gives us life. When this ceases to blow we die. In the skin at the tips of our fingers we see the trail of the wind; it shows us where the wind blew when our ancestors were created.¹¹

The important function of this chant is that it is a verbal formula uttered by Navajos when acknowledging and perpetuating their beliefs in the powers of their creation Gods: First Man and First Woman.

In the early forms of Indian oral narrative it is evident that even though the Indians' lives were harsh, for them the old ways were good; they worked. These narrative forms expressed the Indians' relationship to their natural environment. The first traditional narrative cited depicts the Indians' spiritual life through the relationship to a bear. The second traditional narrative describes the Inuit quest for food. And the third traditional narrative relates the peoples' relationship to their god and creation. As Indians became more and more exposed to Western thinking, many of their old ways were lost or replaced by aspects of the Western belief system, mainly the Judeo-Christian religion, with its white Protestant ethics.

Two prime factors underlie the social protest poetry produced by Indian poets: first, the pressure which Western society has exerted upon Indians to lose their identities in the American melting pot; and second, failure to allow Indians the right of self determination.¹² Thus, the contemporary practice among young Indian poets is to create native soul-type poetry which represents the depth of their anguish; it is also a form of social protest. The contemporary Indian poets' quest for native cultural recognition, as well as social protest which is addressed to the members of Euroamerican society, is evident in the following three poems.

Once when we lived there
They came and told us to be gone
And to get away
So we left
We left and came to here
They didn't think that we could make it

We showed them that we could
 Once again they came and asked . . .
 "What are you doing on my land?"
 They thought that they could make us go
 But once again we made it
 We showed them what we could do
 We showed them who we are
 But,
 Now we got to show them
 HOW WE ARE.¹³

This poem clearly states the position of the American Indian within the oppressive forces of the Anglo American society. It calls the reader's attention to the Indian's ability to physically cope with white oppression, i.e., removal from the land and adjustment to a rented place in the landlord's city. The poem also depicts educated Indians who will take a political stand to defend their rights as human beings.

The following, "Can I Say," is an example of protest poetry:

And it's hard to see the mountains
 When you're sitting in the subway
 It's hard I said to feel the wind
 When you're waiting in some welfare office
 but I'm not a case, I'm not a number
 I can do quillwork
 Mister, I can ride with no
 saddle and hey, listen,
 my brother with his own carved
 arrows can stalk a deer
 Why? are you checking boxes
 when I am trying to talk no
 I do not have outside income
 but there is a tall
 cottonwood I know and sometimes
 I go to see the leaves and this
 morning I heard a meadowlark
 when is the end . . . to die is not the end
 when is the end . . . to die is not the end
 he said, I made my ears like a fox stand
 to hear and I never even go in
 a bank so I got no account
 There is an old man I heard
 saying, "making moccasins . . ."
 no he does not give me money, he
 said to the people
 "make moccasins for your children, it
 is time to go"
 and I guess we are going
 on the plains south where you are always facing
 we are going because the old man is many winters wise. I want someday to bring
 when the sun makes white sparks on
 the creek like dancing fires, I

want to bring some kinnikinnik to him
 he remembers the red willow smoke and a
 buckskin bag and why do your eyes
 say I tell lies?
 I never been insane, I
 never been in jail, I do not drink, I am not
 an addict. I have no car, I do
 not have syphilis or cavities, I did
 have TB, I did drop out, and I
 did get fired, I did not commit mailfraud, I
 did not overthrow the government (lately)
 with your pencil flying, mister,
 can I say there is a good red road
 and a sacred hoop of our people
 which was broken but I would like
 to help mend so the old man would
 be happy. My brother
 brought fresh meat to him
 but the old man says there is not
 much time before he will feed the wolves
 I want him to know that the rivers run free—I do not have
 a pen to sign here—the forests grow
 tall, the plains—I was just in my mind
 thinking mister during this investigation—
 of the plains where the dirt is living
 and wild horses disappear behind a hill,
 I wanted to see the old man at dawn stand
 on the living plains with his horse near, see him raise his arms to the sun, hear
 him say
 “Thank you father”
 . . . again.¹⁴

In this modern narrative the poet relates her socio-psychological situation in a state of severe culture change. She addresses those significant aspects of Indian life which are comprehensible to her native cognitive thinking but incomprehensible when viewed within the realm of the white life style, a system indifferent to personal self. The author also points out her state of confusion when she is asked to relate to Euroamerican values, concepts which are not relevant to her traditional world view.

The last contemporary narrative, in Western Blues form, clearly depicts this Indian's ability, as a modern poet, to work within a western narrative form. Here, she laments the Indians' subjugated position, an oppressed minority within the ranks of a condescending Euroamerican society.

INDIAN in the dirty street
 of the dirty part
 of this dirty town
 INDIAN

there he stands on the corner
expandable, unadjusted
with a police record
not belonging
going no place very fast
frayed blue jeans
maybe on welfare
wants to cut out
go home where there's nothing
but at least—it's his own nothing

he likes the sky,
oh, yes, he still likes the sky
and the wind in his hair . . .
likes to borrow from his sister
let his cousin wear his one good shirt
and maybe he won't ask it back
unproductive
non-competitive
. . . his cousin gets a coat
and he feels great because his cousin
now has a good coat

never heard of Protestant ethics
and if he has he still likes his own better
. . . his great-grandfather
coming straight from the stone age
never had a watch
never knew about hell
until some missionary told him
when they fed the converted savages
the bean-slop
and the fatback
and the love of Jesus

three thousand years of technology
somebody else's brain productions:
a white face on the wall to pray to
don't listen to Momma and Pappa!
try HARD to be like us
and God'll love you
in spite of the fact
that you were born red-skinned
don't talk the way Momma and Pappa talk
at home—they don't know any better
you do—we taught you
make love only in the one position
that won't make Jesus mad at you
and don't suck peyote
don't suck anything
like your school
go to the prom
be grateful
speak ENGLISH

love Jesus
HATE YOUR OWN GUTS!!!

use birth control
don't be promiscuous
don't have babies unless you're married
don't let your inferiority
get the better of you
and tempt you to drink . . .
it's hard, we know
but if you pray
God will help you
to overcome your innate defects
. . . your way of fun's the wrong way
cut your hair if you're a man . . .
now that we told you about sin, don't sin!
be a farmer
make this ground yield
full of rocks and all
save!
don't squander
don't wear the old War Charm
wear the Scapular Medal
let your cousin buy his own shirt
thou shalt not kill
but thou shalt be drafted
because you're a citizen
don't worry
we'll tell you
when to kill and whom
be colorful
be culturally enriching
to our school children
. . . be anything but yourself . . .¹⁵

These three modern poems stand in sharp contrast to the three traditional narratives. First the chants are ritual expressions of beliefs held in common by an entire tribe. To this extent they are similar to such ritualized expressions of Western faith as the *Book of Common Prayer* or the Lord's Prayer, the recital of which is testimony to a shared faith and experience. The traditional expressions are also impersonal. Even in the "Black Bear Song" with its use of the first person it is the ritual which is being celebrated, "Sacred is the act by which my hands are browned," and the speaker, the "I," is subordinated to the ritual which affects the speaker chiefly as a member of the tribe. The tone of each traditional work is stylized and oracular although the content is an expression of tribal feeling and experience. Such expression was once an integral part of tribal life, at once the recognition and supplication of the spirit or spirits which linked

people with the natural world in which they lived. The works express feeling more than ideas.

By contrast, the modern poetry is an expression of the Indians' reaction toward white Euroamerican culture and the socio-psychological pressures which it exerts upon them. The poems are self-conscious. They are cast in the mold of contemporary white culture, deliberately employing a form created by the white cultures to comment ironically upon the outcast status that it has casually decreed for Indians. However, the poems clearly illustrate that the impersonal supplications of nature have been superseded by poetry which reflects bitterly upon the Indians' place in the social rather than natural environment. Despite the underlying assumption of an experience shared by most Indian people, the tone is personal. The writer expresses personal outrage and resentment. This is poetry which leads not to reconciliation to one's condition in the natural world but to protest and rebellion against the socio-economic and political structure of the United States.

The older orations addressed themselves to nature, Indian cosmology and religion, whereas contemporary poetry has little relevance to those aspects of life. Rather than responding positively to life, its demands and goodness, as the traditional prayers, chants, and songs did, contemporary American Indian poetry is one expression of the American Indian's increasing defense of land, culture, and values. American Indians had no positive reason to celebrate the bicentennial year. Ironically, however, the nation's bicentennial aroused Indian awareness of the injustice they suffered. That new awareness has found expression in a new poetry of protest cast in the Anglo-Saxon idiom. Protest poetry, protest demonstrations, and protest litigation, some of it arising from the violation of treaties as old as the United States of America, have all been the Indian response to the bicentennial.

Even though the bicentennial year did not provide Indians with the same motives for a time of jubilant celebration in the same manner that others celebrated that historic occasion, it provoked Indians to express the nature of the inequities imposed upon them by the imperialistic pressures of Western society.¹⁶ They have thus sought to denounce such inequities by adopting Western forms.

In sum, the modern poems depart from the traditional narratives. Change is reflected between these two forms of the Indians' verbal arts. The modern narratives, poems, are structured to meet the Western poetic form, a recognized literary genre. These modern poems,

in contrast to the traditional narratives, address different needs in a different time. They are protest poems. The old Indian traditional narratives do not protest; they deal with life in a natural environment. Furthermore, not only is it evident, as illustrated in the comparative analysis of traditional narratives and modern poetry, that American Indian's world views have changed, but it is clear that the new poetic forms from contemporary American Indian poets are symbolic of the Western world's effects upon the acculturation process of American Indians. The works of modern American Indian poets are symbolic evidence that they do not want to assimilate into white American society, but rather seek to continue, at least in spirit, many of the old beliefs and practices, within the socio-political structure of a multicultural society.

Notes

¹Blacks (Afroamericans) were brought here forcibly and the Mexican Americans, with specific reference to the Southwestern region of this country, were part of the land now belonging to the United States.

²Several major works have been done on the changing world of the American Indian: In 1961, Edward H. Spicer edited a series of essays, *Perspectives in American Indian Culture Change*, which represent changes in the Indians' way of life, from earliest contacts with Europeans to the present. Roger L. Nichols and George R. Adams, in 1971, edited a book of readings, *The American Indian: Past and Present*, which provides us with little-known or misunderstood aspects of the Indian experience in America. Deward E. Walker, Jr., in 1972, put together a reader, *The Emergent Native Americans*, which deals with culture contact. Also, in 1972, Howard M. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, and Robert C. Day, edited an anthology, *Native Americans Today: Sociological Perspectives*, which relates various sociological perspectives in current American society. Merwyn S. Garbarino, in 1976, wrote a book, *Native American Heritage*, which focuses on American Indian ethnology from prehistory to the contemporary scene. And in 1973, Thomas E. Sanders and Walter W. Peek, put together an anthology, *Literature of the American Indian*, which provides the reader with a general overview of the American Indians' spiritual life through literature. These texts, however, do not focus on specific changes in American Indian life as viewed in narratives of oral tradition.

³The author is currently working on an in-depth study dealing with the substitution of English words and concepts for native words and concepts, which from a cognitive point of view would stand on their own. See: Stephen A. Tyler, ed. *Cognitive Anthropology*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969).

⁴Alan Dundes. *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales*. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1962) 195.

⁵James B. Hall and Barry Ulanov, eds. *Modern Culture and the Arts*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967) 288-295.

⁶Gloria Levita, Frank Vivelo, and Jacqueline J. Vivelo, eds. *American Indian Prose and Poetry: We Wait In The Darkness*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974) 148.

⁷Ruth Benedict. *Patterns of Culture*. (New York: Mentor Books, 1953) 56.

⁸A. Grove Day. *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964) 108. "The Osage rituals include a group of 'Black Bear' songs which relate to the myth about how the soil of the earth was given to the people by the black bear as a sign of vigil when they appealed to the divine power for aid in overcoming their enemies. "This act of the bear in disclosing the sacred soil is a sacred and mysterious act; therefore, he who is to open the earth in order to take from it with his hands the soil to be used in this vigil must simulate in detail the actions of the bear.' The soil is used to blacken the face for the later rites." A. Grove Day, 108.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock, eds. *Teachings From The American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Liveright, 1975) 15. "In the darkened [Inuit] house one hears only sighing and groaning from the dead who lived generations earlier. This sighing and puffing sounds as if the spirits were down under water, in the sea, as marine animals, and in between all the noises one hears the blowing and splashing of creatures coming up to breathe. . . [the above song] must be constantly repeated; it is only to be sung by the oldest member of the tribe. . ."

¹¹John Bierhorst, ed. *In The Trail of the Wind: American Indian Poems and Ritual Orations*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1971) 19. This narrative was translated from the Navajo by Washington Matthews. 178-179.

¹²Stan Steiner. *The New Indians*. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968) 17.

¹³D. Taylor. *Project NOW* (Fairbanks: Students of Project NOW, 1975) 2.

¹⁴Dolly Bird. "Can I Say." *Akwesasne Notes*. Vol. 4, No. 3 (Late Spring, 1972) 48.

¹⁵Corey McQueen. "Original American Blues." (from her book, *American Indian Blues*) *Akwesasne Notes*. Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer, 1972) 48.

¹⁶Stan Steiner. *The New Indians*. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968) 14.

Critique

The author of "Change in American Indian World Views . . ." is not only a teacher and student of poetry, but is also a poet who writes about his heritage. It is appropriate that he chose to compare traditional songs and the contemporary pleas of American Indians. A poet can be and is described as "one who is especially gifted in the perception and expression of the beautiful or lyrical." Poetry is the art or work of a poet. If we follow these views of poet and poetry, then we would have to place both of the categories of which the author is speaking in the clear realm of poetry.

My husband and I were standing on the desert in the Southwest admiring the mountain range in the distance. Making an arch with his hand, he said that his people used to run from one end of the arch to the other and within those mountains they would be given songs to bring back to the people (Chiricahua Apache). There was then and is