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College of Liberal Arts

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Marine Corps Cultural Similarities to Native Americans

by Anthony Hines

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According to the 4-field approach to anthropology, a people can be defined by its archaeology, culture, biology and linguistics (Hicks, 2013). Native Americans and Marines have striking similarities as a people when using this approach, especially in cultural and linguistic analysis. Culturally, both groups use story-telling as a means of passing information, value places as cultural centers and have traditions that span many generations among many other aspects. Linguistically, Marines and Native Americans alike have their own language not completely understood by the culture as a whole. As Marines are made up of a cross section of the US population, there are no distinct biological differences between that of the general US populations and no similarities as a people to that of Native Americans. Archaeologically, beyond a few remote battlefields and lost records, Marines have been documented in detail as compared to their Native American counterparts whose history spans thousands of years so similarities in this aspect as few. Native Americans and Marines both see and define themselves in a different way than the norm. Although both Americans, both groups refer to self as a separate group within the larger whole. A Marine will always refer to him/herself as a Marine, not by job title or profession just as a Native American will refer to him/herself with pride as a Native American or by tribe. Also, unlike other cultures in the US, a Marine will always be a Marine past death as a Native American will always be a Native American regardless of social standing or profession.

Marines and Native American emergence differ from that of western culture. Many indigenous cultures emergence stories are connected with the earth unlike westerners who trace their roots back to families from far away countries such as England or Ireland. Iroquois ancestors were thought to have fallen from the sky while others, such as the Pueblo and Navajo, believe to have emerged from under the earth. Marines, like Native Americans, trace their roots back to the beginning. In Philadelphia on 10, November 1775, the Marines were raised by Congressional decree (Martinez, 2013). This “birthday” or emergence is celebrated throughout the globe by Marines regardless of where they are or what they are doing. This close connection to emergence as a people is highly regarded throughout the Marines and is among the most important traditions. During the celebration, usually a ball, the Congressional decree is read aloud word for word to all attendees. Although the emergence of Marines is a documented event, it is treated as lore, much like the Navajo origin stories where the people emerged from lower worlds.

Incidentally, each Marine has their own individual emergence story that begins when he/she is lifted from the civilian world. To become a Marine, an individual must “leave behind” their lives as they are indoctrinated into the Marine culture. Recruit training is referred to as a journey to transformation from a civilian to a Marine where not only subjects relating to warfare are taught, but traditions are instilled and the title Marine is earned. Over 13 weeks, civilians are taken through 4 phases of training. Each phase could be related to the Navajo worlds. Each phase of training designed to create a Marine. Among other things, first phase is the shedding of civilian ways and instilling Marine values and history, much like the first world of the Navajo, one is neither Marine nor civilian. Second phase is focused on warfighting and weapon handling along with recruits from other companies for the first time much like the second Navajo world where other beings are introduced. The third phase where Navajo people were taught to pray

and the difference between right and wrong; Marines are tested and undergo the Crucible, a culminating event that tests the recruits physically and mentally. The recruits officially earn the title Marine after this phase. The final phase, which is to be added in 2018, will introduce training that prepares the recruits for success as Marines through mentoring from senior Marines (Staten, 2017). This can be related to the 5th Navajo world in that they now are able to roam the earth with all they have learned from the journey as Marines (Calloway, 2016).

Marines use story-telling and songs to pass information through time and space in the same manner as Native Americans. Although most of Marine Corps history and procedures are highly documented, Marines remain an extremely superstitious culture. These superstitions are usually passed to younger generations through cautionary tales but cannot be found in orders or directives and some even have orders against them. One such superstition revolves around a specific candy found in MREs, pre-prepared meals consumed while in the field. Charms candy, which has since been removed from MREs, is to never be eaten or bad luck would befall the unit or it would bring rain. While no connection between charms and weather or luck can be proven, Marines were expected to discard the candy immediately and never eat it. Another more significant superstition deals with rank and promotions. Many Marines carry insignia of the next rank in their cover (military hat). Once promoted, it was generally accepted to be “pinned” by higher ranking Marines. Pinning involves removing the frogs from rank insignia placed on the collar and punched into the promoted Marine’s collar piercing the skin. Pinning was thought to be good luck and if not done would result in a reduction in rank in the future. This practice has been outlawed but likely still takes place among some Marines. Superstitions such as these permeate Marine culture in almost every aspect and some sub-cultures have more specific superstitions that are passed through the generations through stories. Marine tankers, for example, find apricots to be bad luck and chicken bones to be good luck. This can be followed back to a story about a tank battalion in World War 2 that became mired in an apricot field and was decimated by incoming artillery. In reality, this is a cautionary tale warning young tankers to prioritize activities during down periods to ensure equipment is ready and a security posture is maintained.

The Marine’s Hymn is another example of oral tradition that is runs deep within the subculture. Possibly written in 1847, twenty years before the music of the hymn, the author is unknown, but is thought to have been a Marine. The Hymn serves as a symbol of pride and fighting spirit and Marines are directed to stand at the position of attention while it plays. The Hymn itself tells of battles fought and won by Marines in the 1800s. Interestingly, the final verse, “*If the Army and the Navy ever look on Heaven’s scenes; they will find the streets are guarded by United States Marines*” is a written suggestion that Marines never stop being Marines even after death (United States Marine Corps [14], n.d.).

The uniform of the US Marine is also veiled in oral tradition. The red piping on the Dress Blue uniform of the enlisted along with the “Blood Stripes” on Officer and Enlisted trousers represent battles past. It is taught early on that the piping and stripes represents the blood shed by Enlisted Marines at the Battle of Chapultepec during the Mexican War in 1847. During this battle, the story tells of the bravery of the small force entered and took the castle while taking high casualties. Although the events did take place, red piping and stripes have been a part of the uniform off and on since the late 1790s. Regardless of this fact, the story is not only passed down through the generations to instill pride and the importance of leadership and bravery in battle, but written in manuals and taught in initial training and Marine Corps history classes. To this day, almost any Marine will attest that the piping and stripes are representative of that battle. Almost every aspect of the many uniforms of Marines are steeped in oral traditions that have been adopted to tell the story of Marine bravery in battle, instill pride in the wearing of them and connect today’s Marines to those of the past.

A final example of oral tradition as a central piece of Marine culture is in stories of legendary Marines and their actions on the battlefield. The legacies they provide are often referred to in day to day activities and are sometimes used as unit slogans. While there are countless Marines held to such high degree, a few have reached a deity like status and are almost worshipped for their skills in leadership and battle. General Lewis “Chesty” Puller was one of the most highly decorated Marines in history for his

actions in WW2 and the Korean War. As a reminder to do the right thing, the question is often asked, “What would Chesty do?” or a reference to Chesty rolling over in his grave is given in the event a Marine did something that was unacceptable. More recently, General Jim “Chaos” Mattis, the current Secretary of Defense, achieved such status and is often referred to or quoted regularly. Like legendary Native Americans such as Chief Sitting Bull, Geronimo and Crazy Horse, their leadership and love for their people coupled with their actions in battle and beyond command a voluntary following that is deep and long lasting. For Marines, elevating and emulating talented leaders and battle tested warriors is a tradition that is based in meritocracy over any other form of value.

The emergence of Native people from the earth as a cultural belief can also be found in the Marine belief system. Places are an integral part in Native culture from sacred lands to burial plots. Native American history as a people is not just people or places, but the relationship between people and the places where events occurred (Nelson, n.d.). Western Apaches, for example, believe that wisdom sits in places and that places are not just their history, but their connection to history (Calloway, 2016). While some tribes make economic profit by allowing access to resources within their lands, many believe that their sacred lands should not be scarred by operations for money due to the deep connections to these sacred lands. Places in their culture are many times far more important than things such as money or things. Marines also value places in connection to their history. The vast majority of the Marine identity is built on events that happened far from home which leads to a culture of places where Marines fought bravely and overcame in desperate situations. In song, the Marines’ Hymn’s first verse, “*From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli*” refers to places Marines have fought (United States Marine Corps [14], n.d.). Beyond song, places are still considered hallowed ground. The raising of the American flag at Mount Suribachi took place on a tiny island in the Pacific Ocean called Iwo Jima. On Iwo Jima, fighting was intense resulting in the death of 18 000 dug in Japanese and 7 000 Marines and Sailor along with 20 000 casualties (Ben-Ghiat, 2015). The battle of Iwo Jima resonates as a testament to the fighting ability of Marines in the face of a well-trained, well-prepared enemy with victory as the only recourse. Among the flag raisers, coincidentally was a Pima Native American Marine named Ira Hayes. An iconic photo of the Marines raising the flag was taken and used to generate money back in the US to fund the war drive.

The tenacity of Marines throughout history can be drawn to these remote battlefields which cannot be visited regularly. As a result, the value of the place represents the value of the events. Going back to the beginning of the Marines in Tun Tavern, places are the centerpiece. Since Tun Tavern no longer exists, its value lives on in tradition, much like the lost lands of the Native Americans in the US which still hold value even though they have been changed. The Marine Barracks at 8th & I is a cultural center for excellence and deeply rooted in history. Not only is it the oldest post, but is also the first barracks and the home of the Commandant who acts as the senior ranking member of the Marine Corps (United States Marine Corps [12], n.d.). The current Recruit Training Depots located in Parris Island, SC and San Diego, CA continue to hold cultural value as the places where Marines are made and are tied to the “emergence” story. One of the most recent places valued by Marines is Fallujah, Iraq. The battle of Fallujah, which took place from 2004-2005 marked the bloodiest battle of the War in Iraq and the most intense fighting the US has seen since Vietnam. Fallujah was an enemy stronghold that drew enemy fighters from all over the region to stand toe to toe with US forces. Although multiple coalition forces tried to gain control of the city, it proved too difficult (Baker, 2017). Finally, in 2004, US Marines attacked and took control of the city after months of urban fighting against a well-defended, well-prepared enemy. Much like the victory at Iwo Jima, the Marines in Fallujah proved that there is no finer fighting force in the US or perhaps the world. To this day, Marines that fought in Fallujah are known as “Fallujah Marines” and are held in regard for their actions over those few months of battle. The list of places that Marines hold valuable is long and distinguished. At the entrance to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in 29 Palms, Ca, the street is lined with 29 palm trees, each displaying the name of a place that the Marine Corps values. Places like Fallujah, Iwo Jima, the Chosin Reservoir and Belleau Wood, France.

Like Native people, not all places have positive associations. The same 29 Palms that displays the names of places where Marines fought bravely holds a negative connotation. Getting stationed at 29 Palms is a fear that every Marine has. Located in the

unforgiving desert of Southern California, receiving orders there brings feelings of dread to the recipient. As a young Marine, 29 Palms is painted as a desolate horrible place and is often used as a threat to those that are below average or in need of motivation to carry on. Other collateral duties associated with place bring the same sense of dread. For example, recruiting duty for many Marines exemplifies the epitome of the worst possible assignment. On a routine basis, a HRST team, HQ Marine Corps Recruiting Screening Team, travels throughout the Marine Corps involuntarily screening and assigning Marines to recruiting duty. Many former recruiters tell horror stories from their experiences while assigned to recruiting. The combination of horror stories and lack of ability to “be a Marine” sent the amount of people volunteering to be recruiters plummeting. Because of the nature of recruiting, it is considered one place although a Marine can be based in any city in the US. Finally, places of spectacular military defeat are generally considered negative in Marine culture. Places like the Maginot Line where French soldiers abandoned their posts when confronted with an advancing German Army are held distasteful due to the lack of bravery and fighting. To this day, French tanks are said to be as fast in reverse as they are going forward.

Marine traditions have a remarkable similarity with Native Americans. Like Native Americans, Marines are extremely ritualistic by nature. Native American traditions, tied with their history hold an important place in their culture. From large gatherings to celebrate occasions like the Marine Corps birthday to the uniforms of Marines represents the heart and soul of the Marines. In a bulletin from the Commandant to all Marines in 2008, General James T. Conway stated, “*customs and traditions provide a link to the past; they bond marines who have gone before with marines who will carry the torch through the future. Any loss of tradition or improper observation of custom blurs our identity and weakens us as an institution. Through the faithful adherence by commanders and each individual marine, we preserve our identity and reputation as a unique and elite fighting organization*” (Conway, 2008). The heavy reliance on tradition as a form of identity is also evident in Native culture. Recently as protests mounted against the Dakota Pipeline, tribes throughout the Indian Nation gathered and each tribal representation was greeted traditionally as a form of unity. Traditions in the Marines serve the same purpose, to provide unity and a connection to the past.

In the case of uniforms, Marines are currently the only service in which the enlisted carry a sword as part of their uniform. Although Officers also carry swords, the NCO sword is the oldest weapon continuous service in the US arsenal (United States Marine Corps, 1999). It was originally given to Marine Non-commissioned Officers to signify the role they play in leading Marines in combat. While only used ceremoniously, it remains the only symbol of authority and leadership bestowed upon enlisted personnel granted by any of the US services. The sword itself is the centerpiece of many traditions in the Marines which are either written in orders or passed through generations. One written tradition is the cutting of the Marine Birthday cake with a sword where the first two pieces are presented to the youngest and oldest Marines in attendance. During weddings, two lines of Marine will stand facing each other with swords raised and crossed for the newly married couple to walk beneath. As the couple approaches the end of the “tunnel”, one Marine will lower his sword halting the newlyweds. The Marine opposite uses his sword to smack the backside of the non-Marine spouse to welcome him/her to the Marine Corps as family. This tradition, while not written, is widely accepted and performed at every Marine wedding. As with the Native American traditional ceremonial dress, the uniform and its parts and pieces are not just clothing symbolic to the transmission of traditional values (Magoulick, n.d.).

Marine and Native traditions also hold eldership and respect as a centerpiece. Native American culture hold elders in high regard and are not self-identified, but the honor is bestowed by the community (Clark and Sherman, 2011). To reach eldership, one must not attain a certain age, but display a certain knowledge or importance to the community it will serve. Marines operate under the same ideology. Promotion through the ranks is a meritocratic process which at higher levels is determined by a board of members that evaluate performance reports and military records to select the best possible candidate. As higher ranks are attained, it is expected that a leader develop his subordinates not only to perform at higher levels, but as a future replacement. Additionally, senior Marines are responsible for teaching juniors the intricacies of success on the battlefield and the passing down of oral unwritten traditions on which the Corps relies. Marines are constantly training their own replacements to be better than themselves to protect the institution and pass on tradition not unlike elders who protect tribal traditions and culture in the same

manner. While generations outside the military are separated by decades, Marine generations are only 4-8 years. “Elder” Marines do not take this responsibility lightly and the respect for their guidance is literally written into daily life. There are many examples from how Marines address each other to who enters a car first. In its totality, the traditions between elders and others in the community are based in respect which has been all but lost in “western” society as a whole but lives on in Native and Marine culture.

Linguistically, the ties are not as close between Native Americans and Marines, however the two cultures touched each other for a brief time. Native American language was used by the US during WW2. Navajo Indians were recruited by the Marines to encrypt messages in the Pacific War which, for a short time, tied the two cultures together. The code talkers would translate a message into Navajo code to be transmitted to another code talker for translation. The secrecy of the messages were important to the operational security of the missions they took part in. Much of the code was a literal translation of a message into the Native tongue. Other military specific terms were assigned Navajo words that looked like pictures of the item or equipment (Shupman, 2007). The language of the Marines, which is part soldier and part sailor is unique to the Marines. Naval terms like “aye, aye”, “port” and “head” are commonplace. Obvious army terms also exist such as “defend and delay”, “yes sir” and “garrison”. Beyond that, there are a number of terms which only make sense to Marines which give them their own sub-language. Probably one of the most recognizable is the term “OOHRAH”. There are many origin stories to the use of this term, but it is widespread and has multiple uses but is understood directly from context, even if there is none. It is also not unusual for a Marine to answer a call or order by saying nothing more than “kill” which is likely a foreign concept to most westerners. The list is innumerable, but remains widely accepted that Marines have their own language. Linguistics as a part of 4-field anthropology, while not directly related between Marines and Native Americans but for a brief space in time, still sets the Marine Corps apart as its own sub-culture.

Native Americans as a sub-culture in the US is a unique balance of identity and belonging. A nation within a nation that has been subject to inclusion and exclusion throughout its history. The similarities between the Native people and the US Marines is unmistakable and impossible to ignore. Marines can also be identified as a separate distinct culture. Many of the shared traditions and values are evident between the two especially as compared to the wider American culture. Just as was written by Sherman Alexi in “*The Absolutely True Story of a Part Time Indian*”, Marines try to exist in two distinct cultures simultaneously. Being a part of a group with as rich a history as the Native American Nation or the United States Marines, both cultures steeped in tradition and tied to their own history ensures the two will always remain a culture within a culture which is probably better for them both lest they lose their distinct identities and melt into the larger, looser culture of the United States.

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