

Compare and Contrast Paper

One of the most apparent differences I have found between my culture and the general treatment of the Native American or Indian culture is how well one can be defined over the other. For example, many Native Americans will agree that it is honorable for a man to wear his hair long, cutting it only in mourning or in other rare circumstance. In my culture (or the expectancies, norms and traditions I feel genuinely applicable to me and my immediate family), no such norm is – in reality – expressed. If I wear my hair long, short, purple or bald, it technically does not go against the fundamental nature of any culture genuinely applying to me.

Here lies the tricky nature of comparing cultures when my own is pulled into question. It simply is not very defined. Admittedly, it can be argued that one may be blind to one's own culture simply because he/she has not been made privy to its uniqueness. Yet I feel my claim carries some weight given my family history. The immigrants in my family tree for the most part left their old lives behind and their descendants followed the norms and trends of American life. A "melting pot" scenario played out, boiling out the uniqueness of individual European customs. Along the way, religious beliefs were questioned and changed, throwing out the identity-oriented benefits of former faith-based traditions. These continued to change until my own generation finds itself without a belief system to claim as our own. Likewise, inter-cultural marriages were common in my ancestry further ostracizing my generation from any single, predominant or legitimate claim to heritage from one country or another.

Therefore, the simplest path I could take would be to identify as simply an "American." Yet what is typically considered to be "American" does not reflect my personal culture or beliefs. For example, I do not frequent any fast food restaurants, enjoy watching football games, swear by the Bible or go to the bar to enjoy some time with friends, which are all things which could be considered mainstream "American" cultural tenants. With that said, any conversation in regard to culture on my part will most likely include many Americanized tendencies, yet lack the certitude of one claiming to be "all-American."

The view of life, its purpose and how it is “spent” has risen to the forefront of my attention in this issue. To me, life is a temporary moment of existence and represents an important dichotomy between two fundamental ways of utilizing the means time makes available. First, one may find ways to enrich one’s own life through earning an income, entertainment, travelling, education, exercise, having a family, etc. Second, one may find ways to change the world through donating of their time or means, through discovery, exploration, achievement, historical impact, and so forth. In both sides of the dichotomy, self-benefitting and altruistic, there are a limited number of moments in a life in mind, and haste is given in priority to those things deemed most worthy of one’s time. A life is considered well spent when both areas are well satisfied to the satisfaction of the one whose life is in question.

Comparing this with a Native American view shows a dramatic contrast. In my studies I have been impressed with the “what will happen will happen” and “living in the true present” mentality. It is hard to describe, but as I understand it, the Native American culture does not look at life as a ticking down clock. Instead, a Native American focuses his/her energies in the living of today, not as a reckless abandonment of consequences, but in more of a reverence for the moment in which one exists, without the stress of over-analyzing the past or the obsession with accurately predicting the future which dominates cultures such as mine. There is a richness, focus and gratitude in regard to the “now” rather than an attempt to make the most out of the hours in a day.

This contrast on how the concept of time being spent also denotes an economic one. I, in my culture, am capitalistic. I see myself as one in constant competition with everyone I see for employment, financial opportunities and in the accumulation of wealth and goods. Although this sounds very Darwinian and cold, it is none-the-less the mentality of the “real world” which I have inherited, and it is up to me to not only achieve a high level of success (directly correlated with how much money I make) but it is to my detriment if I fail to provide a good spring board of economic success to my future children.

This is not the Native American mentality. In a society that values the group or the family over the individual, Native Americans (especially the elders among them) see themselves as part of a group, and the success of the group far outweighs the success of an individual. Where on the one hand there is competition, here there is cooperation. Borrowing, lending, giving, and accepting is a circular form of life. Though the net gain is not necessarily more wealth, a richness of community is strengthened.

I hold claim to a few holidays such as Halloween and Thanksgiving, but mine is not a spiritual culture. In fact, compared with many of my peers I may represent an “extreme” rational, scientifically based view of the universe typical of so-called “skeptics.” I hold no stock in Bigfoot or elves or angels alike. This is not in disrespect to other traditions, but does represent a great void of tradition. While I can claim a soundness of mind only accepting logical possibilities, my life is one absent of the mysteries which some say add meaning, purpose and direction to life.

The Native American culture could be called “superstitious,” but to me, it gravitates to the word “spiritual” much better. Monsters and ghosts are not the emphasis, although they make their appearances in special ceremonies, stories and traditions. The “Great Spirit” or “Great Mystery” rather, is the being who attracts the most significance. Things created by the Great Spirit (nature, animals, etc.) are treated with reverence. Even a slaughtered animal is in a way thanked for giving their life for the benefit of one’s family. This creates an almost familial relationship between the Native American and his/her world, rich with its spiritual connection in all natural things. While the God of the Native Americans does not share the patriarchal tribal-leader like qualities of the Judeo-Christian God, giving offerings, thought and respect to the deity remains a common thread. Likewise, a Native American who is typically spiritual will generally look for spiritualistic meanings behind events, rather than scientific ones.

As touched on before, family is of great import to the Native American. In my culture, family is most often depicted as a burden. I don’t mean this sarcastically at all. Given that most of my peers have

married young and divorced, look at children as primarily an overwhelming financial obligation and have no plans for caring for their elderly parents – I believe this is a reasonably true statement. This is not a view spawned entirely out of culture, but also from economic and societal realities. Regrettably, this mentality is one I also espouse. Seeing as my siblings do not get along due to differing political, religious and other views, we have been content in going our separate ways. I, in fact, see many great benefits of having a family with less interaction rather than more. This is mostly due to our competitive, contemptuous and ideological natures and warrants perhaps more explanation than this paper allows. This is not peculiar to my generation, but represents a long continuation in my family of children having poor opinions of their parents and thus attempting to live in some different way than how they were raised.

To a Native American, I imagine hearing of a family like mine who are related only by blood would be troubling. Granted, modern shifts in the social economic norms of the world impact the young in every culture to different degrees. Yet I believe the expectations, historical precedent and emphasis of family unity and cooperative living is much more established in the Native American culture. This is evident in a typical Navajo greeting, where, when a new member is introduced, they are asked to which clan or family they belong so as to establish a familial connection to the person being met. You are a representative, I suppose, of your family in a tribal community, and therefore are challenged to act in a way so as to not add shame to your family. Belonging to a family as part of one's identity is crucial to a traditional Native American. This goes against the typical American story of one going out in the world and making a name for themselves in spite of their familial beginnings.

It is humbling and saddening to consider these differences and more between my own culture and another with such stark dissimilarity. Although I can make the argument that mine is a good culture which allows me to ultimately prosper and be the most healthy I can be in my circumstance, it fails to

live up to the warmth, comfort and security I imagine one would feel owning such a rich heritage of culture as the Native American.