

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

LaDonna Harris Native American Collection

Digitized Collections

10-5-2022

Native American Philosophy and Perspective of Development

Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO)

Other Native American Organizations

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/lhnac>



Part of the [Indigenous Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) and Other Native American Organizations. "Native American Philosophy and Perspective of Development." (2022). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/lhnac/79>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Digitized Collections at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in LaDonna Harris Native American Collection by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

A NATIVE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY AND PERSPECTIVE OF DEVELOPMENT

COLLABORATIVELY WRITTEN AND PRESENTED BY:

American Indian Trade and Development Council

Americans for Indian Opportunity

Council for Tribal Employment Rights

Council of Energy Resource Tribes

First Nations Financial Project

National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development

Native American Fish and Wildlife Society

Native American Rights Fund

Seventh Generation Fund

PREAMBLE:

This document is the result of a process of dialog and examination of the phenomenon of development within Native American nations and communities, that has been undertaken by the presenting organizations.

What is presented in this document is a broad overview of "development" as it is characterized in five general areas: Governance, Economics, Education, Social Welfare, and Spiritual/Cultural. By addressing all five areas one arrives at an integrated, holistic perception of the multi-dimensional dynamics of development.

The intent of the document is to give the reader a Native American vision of development as a process that is part of the continuum of our existence, and not an isolated event.

The vision of development that we present is rooted in the cultural and historical foundations of Native American societies and nations. It is absolutely essential that any conceptualization of development include these perspectives because to overlook them is to miss an all important ingredient of successful, long term development.

Development must be a process by which sustainable, culturally revitalizing, and people empowering activities come together as part of a comprehensive strategy that is going to insure the continued, unique existence of the people involved. Successful development results from the spirited and fully informed participation of the people whose dreams will be actualized by the process.

The future of developmental activities in "Indian Country" can not continue to be a "top down" process that views our lands and peoples as exploitable commodities, cheap labor, or tax breaks. Nor can we continue to be viewed as incidental items on someone else's development agenda available to their manipulations.

What must begin is an era dedicated to several principles. which include: Family Stability, Non-exploitative Production, Policy Re-Definition, Equitable Relations, Self-reliance, and others that will be elaborated upon in this document.

What must be most clear in everyone's mind is that development in "Indian Country" cannot proceed in the same "business as usual" atmosphere of the past 20 years. There must be a new beginning if we are to see the results of a real re-vitalization of Native American nations and peoples.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:

In order to come to an understanding of a Native American philosophy of development, and the critical role it will play in the future, it is necessary to understand our perceptions of the historical underpinnings of today's conditions.

There are two parts to this historical understanding. First, is our history up to the time of invasion, and then, our history since the invasion. These are two distinctly different courses of development which are intertwined and continue to have significant impact on today's reality. They also hold forth teachings and messages as to what the future of development in "Indian Country" should look like.

All Native Peoples of the Western Hemisphere believe that they were created in the ecosystems they have inhabited since earliest memory. None believe that their existence is the result of some migration from some far off lands.

As demonstrated in the book "American Genesis" there are more and more discoveries occurring within this Hemisphere that point to our existence long before the "Ice Bridge" or other mythical migrations. There is evidence of humans who looked very much like us as long ago as the second interglacial period.

People who are familiar with Native American beliefs will recognize that modern scientific evidence shows that the Native customs of today are not markedly different from those practiced by ancient peoples at least 70,000 years ago. Indeed, if a Native American traditionalist were to seek a career in the study of Pleistocene Man, they may find themselves knowing more about the most ancient belief systems than do the modern scholars.

Native American philosophy is rooted in 70,000 years of growth and development which views the Human species as an integral part of the complex ecosystems in which they thrived. It is very important to understand that Native peoples and their nations are environmentally specific peoples.

This environmental specificity is a critical building block of the philosophical aspects to each of our unique existences. Rather than creating diversity, environmental specificity actually creates a

basis for unity amongst Native peoples. This can be best understood by looking at each of the elements that compose a philosophy:

- * AXIOLOGY: Human to Multiverse - the highest value lies in the balance of relations between humans and other beings or spirits of the past, present and future.
- * EPISTEMOLOGY: Affective/Active - one knows through activity, symbolic imagery, and rythm.
- * LOGIC: Concatenate - all elements and beings of the Multiverse are infinitely linked together.
- * PROCESS: Pantheism - all sets are dependently inter-related in the harmony and balance of the Multiverse.

With these elements as the philosophical basis of our existence each of our peoples evolved languages, customs, ceremonies, economies, and institutions that reflect a close attention being paid to how humans impacted the world through their activities.

From this philosophical basis each of our peoples pursued development in each of the five general areas that produced the following:

- * GOVERNANCE: Governing institutions were highly democratic. Male and female leaders were chosen because of their abilities and attributes to lead through concensus, mediation and conciliation.
- * ECONOMICS: Economic practices and modes of production were developed that did not over exploit an area. All other entities are seen as beings possessed of life equal to ours to whom we must ask for their support of our lives.
- * EDUCATION: One learned what your contributions would be through several stages of human development. Prior to adult-

hood there are three others stages: infant, up until the time one walks, child, up until puberty, and the time of puberty - at this time it is recognized that you are acquiring the power to bring more lives into the world.

Through all three stages care is taken to insure that you acquire an understanding and a belief in your Way of Life and the contributions you have to make.

* SOCIAL/WELFARE: All the while you are on the Mother Earth you are part of a vast inter-dependent network of humans and other beings. You are born with "gifts" and abilities that form your unique presence, but these are "gifts" and abilities that are to be used for the good of the Whole.

* SPIRITUAL/CULTURAL: Spirit and culture are the foundations of all civilizations. The spiritual defines the individual and the group in relation to all other entities of the Multi-verse. Within this view the humans are the weakest, and must ask all other entities to give up their lives so ours may continue.

Culture is the personal, group, and institutional expression of the spiritual beliefs. Culture provides a framework within which our languages evolve, our technology develops, our institutions take form, our arts provide symbol and rythm, and, the individual finds meaning for their existence.

All of this growth and development came to a screeching halt with the invasion. The invasion forced every Native Way of Life to stop paying attention to it's own growth, and put their full attention on how they were going to survive contact with a people who were completely different from themselves.

The fundamental differences between European and Native American peoples lies in the formation of our philosophies. The philosophical model is based on the following formula:

Axiology + Epistemology + Logic = Process by which a people manifest their existence

Side by side, the difference appear as thus:

	EUROPEAN:	NATIVE AMERICAN:
AXIOLOGY:	Humans are the highest form of Life. All else can be objectified and manipulated. Objects can be given value and prioritized by Humans.	Humans are the weakest form of Life and are dependent on other Life for theirs. All Life is equally valuable.
EPISTEMOLOGY:	Cognitive - gained through counting and measuring, emphasis is on stratification of all things.	Affective/Active - gained through activity, symbolic imagery, and rythm, emphasis is on integration, and personal understanding.
LOGIC:	Dichotomus - either/or. There is a right way or wrong way which is defined by who is in power.	Concatenate - there are no absolutes, there are many possibilities. What is just and right define the situation.
PROCESS:	Technology - all sets are repeatable and reproducible.	Pantheism - all sets are dependently inter-related in the harmony and balance of the Multiverse.

At the core of this difference is the differing beliefs in the nature of Life. Native peoples believe that all living beings are spiritual beings. Spirits can be expressed as energy forms manifested in matter. A blade of grass is an energy form manifested in matter - grass matter. The spirit of the grass is that unseen force which produces the species of grass, and it is manifest to us in the form of real grass.

All things of the world are real, material things. The Creation is a true material phenomenon, and the Creation manifests itself to us through reality. The spiritual universe is manifest to Humans through a Creation comprised of many different universes - the universe of the animals; the universe of the water life; the universe of the birds, etc.

Through what can be called the "Original Instructions", each of our peoples received directions that we who walk about on the Mother Earth are to express a great respect, an affection, and a gratitude toward all the spirits which create and support Life. We are instructed to give a greetings and thanksgiving to the many supporters of our lives - the corn, the animals, the winds, the sun. When people cease to respect and express gratitude for these many things, then all Life will be destroyed, and human life on this planet will come to an end.

These are the fundamentals of our beliefs which have carried us for at least 70,000 years. Within a span of 500 years these beliefs, our Ways of Life and our peoples have undergone a total attack of nearly unimaginable proportions.

The net result of this attack has been the induction of a "state of anomie" amongst Native peoples. "Anomie" - is a sociological term denoting a loss of faith, and a collapse of the institutions of a people, thus it becomes an anomic condition.

From the outset of the invasion our peoples have been subjected to a relentless process of de-humanization. Everything of value to us has been de-valued by the invading peoples. Within the past 150 years some of the most severe damage has occurred and continues to plague U.S./Native American relations to this day.

Through the combination of laws, policies, and court decisions the U.S. has defined a relationship with Native American peoples that it has defined with no other peoples on the continent. This combination creates a framework for domination of Native American nations, their peoples, lands and resources which directly contribute to the anomic condition.

The anomic condition is comprised of four distinct, and inter-related components:

1. **The Experience of Oppression:** Every living Native American has a direct experience of oppression in form or another. For some it has been the oppression of the Termination Era; or the Relocation Era; or the boarding schools; or the continuing effects of the Dawes Act.
2. **Messages of Mystification:** Mystification creates and perpetuates confusion and disharmony which manifest in feelings of inferiority, powerlessness, and hopelessness. three of the

most mystifying messages are: The Trust Theory, The Plenary Power Doctrine, and the Doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

3. **Feelings of Isolation:** Isolation is experienced individually and collectively. The establishment of reservations has induced a collective isolation; while within the reservations families and individuals experience physical and psychological.
4. **De-humanization of Ourselves and Others:** In the 1500's Europeans held heated debates as to whether or not we were human beings, the debates concluded with a resounding: "We don't know!" It has been our experience ever since that time that we are not seen as human beings - evidenced in the laws and policies of the U.S.

On the individual level, when one doesn't see themselves as a worthy being they begin to act that way, and begin to de-humanize others through internalized racism, sexism, physical abuse, and other abnormal behaviors.

These four elements sum up the process by which Native Americans have arrived at the terrible state of affairs they find themselves in today. We hold an infamous lead in all of the negative statistics measuring the human condition. But it must be firmly recognized that we hold this lead because of deliberate actions, and attitudes that designed this condition for us.

It must also be recognized that there remain in place today, laws, policies, institutions, and attitudes that continue to contribute directly to the anomic condition.

Development in Native America must be an integrated, holistic process of re-vitalization by which Native Americans can reclaim their place within the global community. This would be a position within which we would stand as equals to all other peoples of the world, free of external domination and interference; free to define what is appropriate for us; and, free to make our own mistakes.

Development must take place in a rational, progressive manner that has the best interests of people and their environment at it's core. It must lead to a sustainable growth that nurtures the cultures, beliefs, and Ways of Life of the people who are participating. Most importantly, it must be participatory - it cannot be imposed.

Lastly, development needs to be predicated on the principles of the "nation to nation" relationship Native Americans have long sought between themselves and the United States. Not as "wards" of the government, nor in the same category as parks and mines. But more appropriately, a "government to government" relationship that has as it's basis an integration of the best of current domestic law and policy, and, established and evolving international laws, conventions, and principles.

Such an integration of domestic and international law and principles will create an environment that will underscore our inherent rights to exist as distinct and unique peoples and nations. It will provide a scenario that gives both sides guidelines and parameters within which to evolve a new era of relations between our nations.

In order for this re-vitalization to occur it must be viewed as having two components - 1. an internal component that must be actualized by Native American people; and 2. an external component that re-defines the relations between the Native nations and the U.S. These are not necessarily separate developments. In many cases various aspects can only be worked on internally, but in a great many aspects U.S./Native American cooperation is absolutely necessary.

INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT:

Using the five general areas of development we outlined earlier, we can begin to examine some of the pragmatic steps that need to be taken to bring about an internal re-vitalization.

GOVERNANCE: Several recent studies have recognized the need for efforts that lead to the stabilization of Native American governments. Such stabilization is mostly an internal development that needs to happen from within each existing nation as it sees and defines its governmental needs.

Many nations and organizations have been expressing a need for constitutional reform. Many people have recognized that the "boiler plate" constitutions that were developed under the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) are not adequate to address the governance issues facing our nations.

Native American governments and non-governmental organizations can and are, developing processes that can lead to constitutional reform and governmental re-structuring. Such efforts include seminars,

training, and technical assistance that assist Native American leaders and people in identifying the governance issues they are facing, and developing their own solutions to those issues.

Time is a critical issue facing Native American governments. Constitutional reform must be a patient process that occurs at a speed that is appropriate to the individual nation. By undertaking constitutional reform each nation is developing solutions that will have long term impact that cannot be made hastily.

ECONOMICS: The legacy of economic development in Indian Country over the past 20 years has left many with a sour taste. There are hundreds of reams of paper used up in reports bemoaning what appears to be a massive failure to inspire economic development in Indian Country.

Instead of viewing the experience of the past 20 years as a failure, it should be viewed as a lesson. One of the lessons that clearly emerges from this era is that economic development is much more than creating jobs, or implanting external infrastructure on a reservation.

In order for there to be successful economic development it must grow from, and reflect the affected people's desires and needs. In this context, it must be a very participatory process that takes the time to take into account all of the varying views of what economic development should mean to those who are going to be affected. There are some very fundamental "building blocks" that need to be in place

which include:

- * Economic Literacy - Fundamentals in economics need to be taught to all age groups and levels of Native American society. Within such a curriculum there needs to be an exposure to the various economic systems that exist in the world. The goal of such a program would be the evolution of economic thinking and practices that flow from a particular people's culture and World View.
- * An Embedding of Principles and Practices - One outcome of a comprehensive development of a people's economic literacy would be the embedding of their principles and practices within their laws, policies, and codes. It would be embedded in the curriculum of the education processes they employ, and, it will become a part of the "community dialog" about their future.
- * Freedom to Allocate Internal Resources - A comprehensive process of economic development can be frustrated if the national government and its people cannot freely allocate and prioritize their resources to serve their needs. In this context, steps to bring about governmental reconstitution must be integrated with developmental steps to bring about economic possibility.

EDUCATION: Education is an equally critical factor within the development scenario. Educational development also needs to be undertaken in a manner that is supportive of the other four areas. For this to occur it is critical that the affected people take "ownership" of the education processes they identify as meeting their needs.

By education processes we include all levels and phases of education: pre-school, elementary and secondary, post-secondary, vocational, and adult ed.

By taking "ownership" of education processes, Native Americans will be in a position to clear up some of the ambiguities that plague the current scenario of "educating Native Americans", versus "Native Americans educating themselves". Through this transformation we are then in a position to forecast our own future, and focus our energies and talents to meet that future.

Many Native American communities are already engaged in this transformation and need to be supported and encouraged to continue their efforts. There are a number of positive and innovative models that have emerged that can have replicability in other communities.

SOCIAL/WELFARE: The anomic condition has caused two sub-cultures that radically effect all of our undertakings. One is the sub-culture of Addiction, and the other is the sub-culture of Poverty.

Both sub-cultures have significant attributes and patterns that must be understood in order for effective strategies to be developed to end their destructive capacities.

In both cases, their impact on Indian Country is total. Everyone has been effected, some more than others, but no one has escaped. The attributes they have in common are:

- * Distrust of our own thinking
- * Loss of self-esteem
- * Self-destructive, self-defeating behavior
- * Loss of a future

Fortunately, there is a great deal of positive work occurring throughout Indian Country to undo these conditions. The success of the Shuswap people at Alkalai Lake, in British Columbia, is one example. The success of the "Red Road Counselling Process" is another model.

What is clear is that sobriety is not the only answer to the problems plaguing our peoples. It is one step in a long, comprehensive process of "Re-building Our World". There is an inordinate amount of pain and suffering that has to be addressed, and healed as our people reclaim their humanity.

This healing must go hand-in-hand with the other forms of development. It must be seen as the keystone to re-building our present so that we have a future.

SPIRITUAL/CULTURAL: This last are of development is actually the foundation on which rests all the other areas of development.

In this context the word "spiritual" is not assigned any particular religious connotations. It is used to denote the vital and dynamic existence of people who believe in themselves, their institutions, their capability to actualize their dreams, and, their capacity to envision a future for themselves.

As Indigenous peoples we are the inheritors of non-Western cultures. These cultures provide us with alternatives, systems, institutions and beliefs that contribute to our unique and special existences.

As our spirit becomes revitalized; as we regain trust in our own thinking; as we reaffirm our rights our cultures will become revitalized. For many our cultures are sort of "under glass" - frozen in a time and era different from the present. We also see that glass shattering.

Throughout Indian Country our languages are being re-vitalized; our young aggressively seek out their cultural heritage; and more of our people look to their original ways for inspiration in dealing with the issues confronting us. Our foundation is beginning to come back together again.

For all of these elements to reach successful conclusions they need time, and space in which to take root and re-bloom. These are not problems that will be solved overnight.

A new perception needs to take hold in America that will take some of the pressure off our leaders and people as they struggle with these issues. One incessant pressure that we feel from the U.S. government, it's agencies, and other institutions providing assistance to Native Americans is a demand for quick results.

What has happened to us did not happen overnight - it occurred over a period of 200 plus years. The problems we see before us today are

the accumulated results of years. The solutions will not come in one year, or three years. Success comes in little pieces which are the result of years of persistent work and commitment.

Much of the success we are striving to achieve is not easily counted or measured. Much of the time success is not easily duplicated or repeated. The precise cause of this are the thousands of human variables involved in the process of development.

Another factor that must be taken into account is the fact that what we may perceive as a success, may not look like a success in Western eyes. Both peoples have different ways of measuring the same things. Not that one is better than the other, or should be, it just the fact that we are different peoples.

It also needs to be recognized and affirmed that our diversity from the Western Cultural mode is not an "ethnic" diversity - it is rooted in the fact that we come from non-Western cultures. It is also rooted in the fact that we possess a different history of our relations with the U.S. from all other peoples who live in these lands.

With these realities taken into account we can begin to examine the possibilities of a different future of relations between the peoples of "Indian America" and "Non-Indian America".

NOTE: AT THIS POINT WE CAN "TAILOR" THE SPECIFICS OF EXTERNAL DEVELOPMENT IN RELATION TO OUR INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT.....