

Along the Robeson Trail

by Dr. Stan Knick, Director- UNC-P Native American Resource Center

There are a great many issues facing the Lumbee today. Many of these issues have grown out of the varied historical relationships with non-Native Americans, or out of relationships with other groups of Native Americans. Some of these issues echo the same concerns which have faced human beings everywhere since the beginning of time.

One of the issues resulting from relations between Indians and non-Indians has to do with the fact that certain people want to learn about Native American culture. Most of these people are non-Indians, but increasingly they include Indian people as well (for example, many students currently majoring in American Indian Studies at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke are themselves Native Americans). But why do so many people want to learn about Indian culture, and what are the impacts of their wanting to do so?

The desire to learn about Indian cultures is of course not new. For more than a century people have been systematically recording things about Native American life — styles of clothing and housing; details of medical practices and hunting ceremonies; structures of language and social order. The primary stated motive in recording all this information has usually been the well-intentioned notion of preserving and understanding Indian culture. But have the good intentions of researchers always been sufficient to prevent a negative impact on the people being studied? The answer depends on whom one asks.

Some Native American people today are quick to point out that information recorded years ago by non-Indians has been essential in recent efforts to revitalize Native cultures.

For example, recently several Lumbee artists have been reaching back into archaeological and early historical accounts for inspiration for their contemporary artworks. Some details of the old ways simply would not be available today if they hadn't been recorded by some outside researcher.

Other Native Americans are just as quick to point out that those early researchers themselves did much to change the traditional cultural ways of the people they studied, sometimes just by bringing non-Indian cultural ways along with them on the study. There is definitely some truth in both of these perspectives.

But why do people today, in the late 1990s, want to study Indian culture? Part of the answer is the same as always: to preserve cultural traditions lest they disappear. But there is another, deeper, part of the answer. To understand it, we have to look at culture itself.

For thousands of years, human culture has been basically a conservative force. There were important changes from time to time, but for the most part culture was effective in helping people deal with their environment precisely because it remained basically the same over long periods of time. In every culture, on every continent, these words have been repeated: "Do it *this* way, my son (or daughter), because *this* is the way we have always done it — *this* is the way our elders taught us to do it." This conservative tendency of culture worked very well.

However, modern culture in America doesn't always operate that way any more. In just the twentieth century we have seen more dramatic cultural change in America than was experienced in the previous five centuries. Nowadays, very few things remain in fashion for long. Some of

the rapid changes in our culture have had, and continue to have, devastating effects on the environment, not to mention the de-humanizing effects of our fast-paced lifestyle.

Meanwhile, many people have realized that traditional Native American culture was more stable, more in harmony with the environment. And in a modern society where everything changes, for many people it is comforting to hold onto, celebrate and strengthen the good things which remain.

Of course Native American responses to this have differed. Some Native groups have chosen to close some of their ceremonies — as well as their personal lives — to outsiders, and have stated that they don't wish to be studied. And it is clearly their right to do so. But other Native groups have stated that they realize that they have something important for America to learn, and that they are willing to share the goodness of their ways with a needy world: "if you come to share in our vision, you are welcome." The Lumbee Wild Game Festival, held each November, is a good example of this approach.

Lumbees have been confronted with the fact that other people, sometimes other Native people, want to learn more about their particular form of Native culture. In some ways, they are still coming to terms with this issue. An understanding of this and other contemporary issues facing the Lumbee is part of our effort to see the Lumbee in context.

In the next segment, we will look further into the contemporary issues facing the Lumbee. For more information, visit the Native American Resource Center in historic Old Main Building, on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke.



Maxine Blue, NP-C

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