

Book Review

THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS: A Sourcebook

Edited by *Roger C. Owen, James J. F. Deetz, Anthony D. Fisher*
(The Macmillan Company, New York ; Collier-Macmillan Limited, London).

Review by **WHITALL N. PERRY**

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 2, No. 1. © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

The subtitle is somewhat misleading,¹ for the book is actually a compilation of articles from scientific studies that cover specialized aspects of Indian culture. Although there are more than fifty contributors, the approach is largely by way of phenomenology, speculation, and statistical relevancy, the whole forming a well documented work directed less to lovers of Indians than to lovers of anthropology. Thus, the reader is invited by Ruth Underhill, "widely recognized as an authority on American Indians, especially on their religious life," to believe that:

(For) the American Indian of pre-Columbian days ... with little knowledge of natural science or medicine, with small acquaintance with other peoples... a large section of his world was unknown, mysterious, and, possibly, threatening. His techniques for dealing with this unknown, which he conceived as supernatural, I shall speak of as religion. Few groups had any consistent theology. Their interest was in action. ...Nor had the spirit world much connection with ethics.

She tells us that the first paleolithic immigrants may have brought in the concepts of *mana* and *taboo*, which subsequently became identified with the Siouan *wakan*,² Iroquoian *orenda*, and Algonquian *manitou*. Again, one can learn from Bruno Nettl, a "practicing ethnomusicologist," a great deal about the ethnic repartition of musical forms among the tribes, such as the modified isorhythmic patterns of the Menomini, or the use of tetratonic scales in the strophic song forms of the southern Athabaskan music area, but the uninitiated reader will hardly come away more advanced in his appreciation or understanding of what constitutes the basic sound; whereas one really got into the cry and the beat in a fine series of articles by William Powers recently appearing in the late review, *American Indian Tradition*. For those interested, there is an article on balanophagy, or acorn eating, as practiced by Californian Indians,—an essay on the problem of the aged among the Eskimos—and a treatise on Mohave homosexuality, an object lesson from the editors' stand-point because "(their) society provides a status for them."

Some of the articles have valuable documentation for the non-specialized reader. Those who think of the Indians as fundamentally combative, for instance, will be interested to learn of an almost Buddhist ethic of non-violence that permeated the Plateau Sanpoil culture, representative for the rest of that Edenic life eulogized by Shakespeare :

All things in common nature should produce

Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.

Also meriting especial attention are such contributions as the one by Clyde Kluckhorn and Dorthea Leighton on the Navaho language, and George B. Grinnell's study on *Coup and Scalp*.

But the pitfalls of pedantry are salient also, as when the editors inform us that "most American Indians held (religious) beliefs that were highly individualistic," or that "no group of North American Indians was (*sic*) more atypical than the hawk-nosed, feather-wearing, buffalo-hunting Sioux, Cheyenne, or Crow...Glorified through 'wild-west' shows... the Plains Indian depicted by Hollywood was a product of acculturation." Is this why the endpaper map showing the distribution of tribes on the North American continent fails to indicate the existence of the Sioux? In any case, the prototype for the editors is rather to be found in the "despised Digger" of California, or the "nonromantic Pima" of the Southwest, or the "haughty Kwakiutl" of the Northwest Coast. Elsewhere, in speaking of the Plains Indian "horse complex," they observe that "if the short-term effect of the horse and gun was cultural grandeur, the long-term result was cultural disintegration," and they say there is a warning in this for the innovation-minded man of the mid-twentieth century. The reader will do well to be on his guard against other excesses of erudition, as where an anthropologist writing on the Kiowa Sun Dance says: "Incidentally, 'sun dance' is a misnomer, since the dance is by no means connected solely with the sun. On the contrary, it probably is concerned with it to no greater degree than is Plains Religion as a whole..."

By way of compensation, there is an article on Indian-White relations by D'Arcy McNickle, who is not only an anthropologist, but a Montana Flathead into the bargain who knows how to aim his arrows and make them penetrate: the carnage he leaves behind has Custer Battlefield looking more like a minor skirmish. Thus he cites from a recent writer, R. H. Pearce, on the American attitude determining policy towards the Indians:

The Indian was the remnant of a savage past away from which
civilized men had struggled to grow. To study him was to study the
past. To civilize him was to triumph over the past. To kill him was to
kill the past.

And he presents verbatim the arguments of Senator Pendleton of Ohio in behalf of what was to become the infamous Dawes Act (General Allotment Act) of 1887, by which "the Indians were relieved of some ninety million acres, or almost two-thirds of their land base, between the years 1887 and 1930":

They must either change their mode of life or they must die. We may regret it, we may wish it were otherwise, our sentiments of humanity may be shocked by the alternative, but we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that that is the alternative, and that these Indians must either change their modes of life or they will be exterminated... In order that

they may change their modes of life, we must change our policy ... We must stimulate within them to the very largest degree, the idea of home, of family, and of property. These are the very anchorages of civilization; the commencement of the dawning of these ideas in the mind is the commencement of the civilization of any race, and these Indians are no exception.

"In the heat of such a discussion," concludes D'Arcy McNickle, "it would- not have occurred to any of the debaters to inquire of the Indians what ideas they had of home, of family, and of property. It would have been assumed, in any case, that the ideas, whatever they were, were without merit since they were Indian."

There is also an article (which originally appeared in *Tomorrow*) on the use of peyote, by James S. Slotkin, himself a member of the Native American Church, which gives an enlightening account of the ritual therapy of this herb from the view-point of its devotees, and likewise a caution to white people on its use: "They tend to be psychologically traumatic." Lastly, we are pleased to see John Collier given the final say, in his tireless championing of the Indian.

The book suffers badly from a total lack of photographs, or pictures of any sort other than map designs that introduce the regional sections.

One unique feature is a comprehensive list of educational films on the Indian. There is also an extensive bibliography, but somewhat compromised by an inevitable preference for writings in the vein of the book itself.

¹ Frederick Webb Hodge's two-volume *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, New York, 1959, comes far closer to the definition of *Sourcebook*.

² *Wakan* refers to all which is holy or sacred ; *mahopa* is actually the Siouan term which serves for the context.