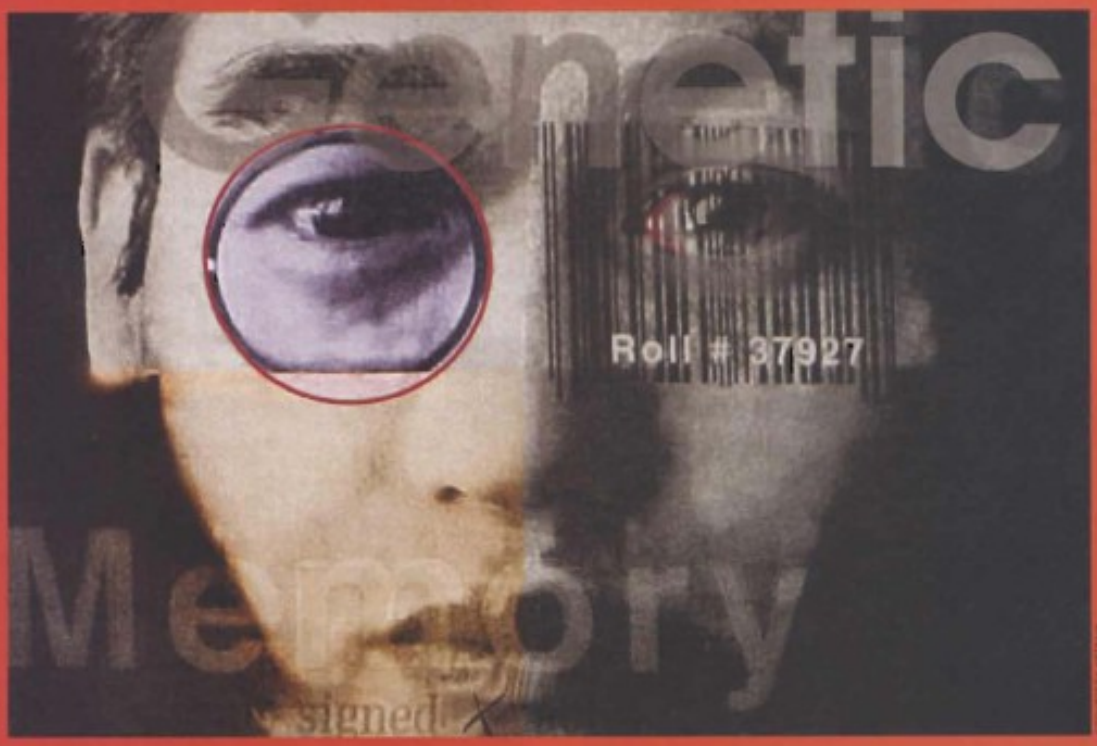
Identity Crisis



Indian Identity in a Changing World

BY PATTY TALAHONGVA (HOPI)

At what age does anyone come to the realization of self in terms of ethnicity? For Gary Tahmahkera, his earliest childhood memories are of times spent with his Comanche grandparents and learning the culture and the language. But Tahmahkera is also half-white. "I think all through early school days I was made aware I was Indian by my last name," he recalls. "Generally, the dominant society made it clear you weren't one of them; you were a savage."

Looking back now, he can laugh at his way of coping with being biracial and accepting his two identities. "I really knew I was Indian when I watched Billy Jack!," he jokes, referring to the half-Indian and half-white movie character. Tahmahkera grew up knowing he was a Comanche Indian and that he was enrolled in his tribe.

Matt Kelley is Chippewa. "In one sense I wear my Indian identity on my sleeve because of my hair," he says of his shoulder-length hair, which he wears in a ponytail. "I don't go out

of my way to tell people I'm Indian, though, unless they ask or it's relevant, or they're Native, too." Kelley didn't realize until he was a teenager that he had a Native heritage, and he's not enrolled in his tribe.

For every single person who walks this earth, the question "Who am I?" remains basic and yet complex. For the indigenous peoples of the United States, this question digs deeper into historical trauma of the past and the economic status of the present. There is no single right answer, and likewise there is no single wrong answer. Rather, the definition of being Native American or American Indian really depends on whom you ask. But make no mistake: There is no issue of greater complexity and importance before Native peoples today than the question of who is an Indian and how that is determined.

TRIBAL ENROLLMENT AND BLOOD QUANTUM

Webster defines American Indian as "A member of the aboriginal peoples of the Western Hemisphere except usually the Eskimos; an American Indian of North America and especially the U.S."

If only it were really that simple. Instead, American Indians are the only ethnic group in the U.S. who must prove their heritage in official government documents if they wish to partake of the benefits offered in treaties made with the government. American Indian tribes who have federal recognition status are granted a government-to-government relationship with the U.S. federal government. That coveted status ultimately leads to quasi self-government of tribes over their people, their citizens or members.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs is charged with the oversight of tribes as well as the federal recognition process. There are more than 562 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. with 1.7 million citizens, according to the BIA. And there are hundreds more groups seeking that status. The federal recognition process can take decades. One criterion for getting federal recognition is the tribe's enrollment process.

Each tribal nation is free to set its own enrollment requirements. The nation's largest tribe, the Cherokee, has two main bands. The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma doesn't require a blood quantum (a percentage of one's physical heritage that can be proven by written records to be derived from a specific tribe) but does insist that people desiring to be enrolled can prove their descendancy from Cherokees. However, the Eastern Band of Cherokee, based in North Carolina, requires its members to prove their ancestors were on the 1924 Baker Roll, as well as have 1/16th degree of Eastern Cherokee blood. For the Chippewa-Cree of Montana, you have to be one-quarter blood quantum and prove your descendancy from the original 29 family members.

Some critics say this method is nothing short of a pedigree similar to that of prize dogs or horses. Still, each tribe must have its own answer to the question "Who is an Indian?" For the Navajo, the second-largest tribe in the U.S., the answer is one-quarter Navajo blood. Anything less and the person is not allowed entry to the tribe.

For Natives who are enrolled, there's good-natured joking among them about who's a "card-carrying Indian" and who isn't.

ONE TRIBE'S FIGHT FOR FEDERAL RECOGNITION

Federally recognized tribes receive government funds that are used to run tribal departments. They also are exempt from state and local jurisdictions, including not having to pay taxes to those entities. Their card-carrying members also have free access to healthcare, education and housing opportunities.

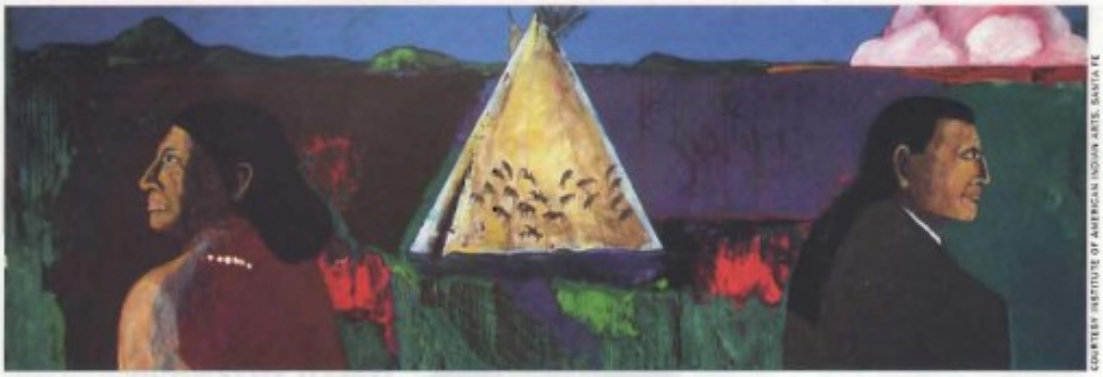
"There's never been a day in my life that I didn't belong," says Schaghticoke Chief Richard Velky. He grew up knowing his Native roots even though his tribe is not federally recognized. Yet the Schaghticokes are recognized by the state of Connecticut, where they've lived for hundreds of years. They even have a 400-acre reservation.

In 1981 they submitted a letter of intent to the BIA for federal recognition. In 1994 they filed their petition. The process is long and requires a lot of research and documentation by anthropologists, scientists and cultural experts. Finally, in January of 2004 they received word they had met all the criteria to be federally recognized. The final step was a waiting period for any potential appeals to their case by any other interested parties. The waiting period was to end on May 5, 2004. Just two days before the waiting period expired, the state of Connecticut appealed the Schaghticokes' recognition. Now there's a second evaluation of the Schaghticokes' paperwork and another deadline for the decision to grant them federal recognition. The tribe is waiting for the appeals process to end and are hopeful, come Sept. 12, 2005, they will receive their federal recognition.

Today, as chief of the 300 or so members of the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation, Velky sees it as his duty to get his tribe federally recognized. "This land has been the Schaghticoke Nation for 300 years. As the leader, it's my position to protect it for the next 300 years to come," he says. "Our ancestors have worked the land. As good stewards of the land, we need to protect it for future generations. If we don't protect it today, we will be gone."

FACING PAGE: *Genetic Memory* by Richard Ray Whitman (Euchee, Muscogee Nation), computer altered photograph, 24 x 30", 2003; ABOVE: *Assimilation or Affiliation?* by Perry Eaton (Kodiak Alutiiq), mask, 2004.

COURTESY CHANGING HANDS: ART WITHOUT REMPRESENTATION 2



COURTESY INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN INDIAN ARTS, SANTA FE

And when it comes right down to personally identifying as a Schaghticoke person, Velky says they know who they are. "We don't need anyone to tell us that, we know that," he says.

THE STAKES RISE

Indian gaming has changed the face of some tribes who are taking a second look at their enrollment process, especially if they hand out gaming revenue per-capita payments to members.

Tahmahkera is married into the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community in Arizona. He and his wife Roelene have seven children together. When their eldest son was born, they looked at his tribal enrollment from an economic viewpoint. At the time, Salt River didn't have a casino on its radar. What his son's enrollment boiled down to was educational benefits. His wife's tribe offered more financial aid than his Comanche tribe, so the decision was made to enroll the children at Salt River, where the family resides. But Tahmahkera says they also looked at it from a traditional viewpoint. The Comanche often adopted captives or other people who came upon their band and lived with them.

"It's not how you're enrolled, or where, it's how you're raised," Tahmahkera says. "Because our children are of two tribes, we're raising them with the knowledge of both tribes. That's where the grandparents' influence comes in. They're the ones teaching the language, traditions and history from each tribe." And now that his wife's tribe has a casino and pays out per capita, the children are benefiting even more by being enrolled at Salt River.

However, the tribe is currently asking its members if they should make the enrollment process stricter for the future. They are concerned about too many people trying to get enrolled just for the casino benefits.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION GOOD ENOUGH FOR SOME

But even the lure of these fringe benefits isn't enough for some American Indians. There are many who refuse to enroll in their tribes. Some don't fancy the idea of being a "government-approved" Indian, while others don't have enough blood to meet their tribe's enrollment criteria. Still other people may be "full-blood Indian" but a mixture of several tribes. For instance, their parents may each have two or three tribal affiliations, but the children don't have enough blood from any one single source to enroll in any of their tribal affiliations.

As for Kelley, who's not enrolled in his tribe, he represents another group of American Indians: those who weren't raised in their cultural traditions and discovered their heritage later in life.

"I grew up in and around Davenport, Iowa. I was raised essentially as a white guy," Kelley says. "I view myself as a mixed blood. I didn't find out about this until my grandfather died when I was a teenager. He and the rest of that side of the family had kept it a secret only talked about in whispers and oblique references." But once he learned of his cultural ties to the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Kelley embraced his identity.

"Indian is a sense of identity, but one which has to be backed up by a genetic component," he says. "There is no 'way' to be Indian, to act Indian, or think Indian. You are or you aren't; you identify with the traditions of your ancestors or you don't. You can run from it or embrace it, but if it's your heritage, you're Indian."

Kelley is light skinned, and he's used to the baffled reaction people have about his heritage. "It doesn't bother me. I know that with light skin, green eyes and brown hair I'll always get a lot of the 'That's funny, you don't look Indian' reactions. Some people are really focused on tribal enrollment or membership, a view I respect but believe is too rigid. I'm comfortable enough with myself and my background that I don't need validation from everyone I meet; I am who I am."

Pamala Silas, a Menominee tribal member, notes, "I was fostered out as a child, and being enrolled saved my life." Despite her birth mother's troubled life, Silas says she's thankful her mother had the wherewithal to enroll her children. It prevented her abusive foster parents from adopting her.

"Enrollment is not just a personal identity issue; it comes with rights and responsibilities," she says. Gaming, according to Silas, is just another option for tribes if they wish to pursue that right. She rattles off the list of rights granted to enrolled tribal members, which include medical assistance and educational benefits but also traditional fishing and hunting rights.

"I've never lived permanently on my reservation, but I have a birthright," she says. "And do you know how pertinent that is

to a girl who's been raised in foster care? That's just priceless." She wonders what would have happened if her mother hadn't enrolled her. "I wouldn't even know what tribe I came from or how to spell it! I am who I am because of being a member of the Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin."

However, when it came to her two children, she had to enroll them in her father's tribe because they didn't meet the blood quantum of the Menominee. They are Oneida. Today her children are learning the traditions of the Oneida and Silas is learning as well. She lost out on that heritage while growing up in Chicago.

As for Kelley, he has two daughters and is trying his best to raise them with some knowledge about their Chippewa heritage. "That's tough, particularly because I wasn't raised with knowledge of, or connection to, my heritage, as well as the fact we don't live in an area with a particularly large or cohesive Indian community. I tell them about it at every opportunity; I read to them, I encourage them to ask questions, and we attend powwows and other cultural events together," Kelley explains.

He's not alone. According to the latest census figures, of the more than half of the country's population who identified themselves as being Native American, most said they lived in urban areas and not on reservations. So, Indian identity questions could be changing even more for future generations who aren't familiar with traditional homelands, whether that's on a reservation or allotment lands. And with that detachment from the land comes some detachment from traditional ceremonies—and even more challenges to the question "Who is Indian?"

As American Indians move into the 21st century, the questions surrounding Indian identity and how it is determined are sure to grow even more complex. Few issue pose greater challenges to tribal governments and their members, and how they respond to this issue will certainly shape the future course of Indian life.

Patty Talahongva (Hopi) has been a journalist for more than 20 years. She is the managing editor and host of, "Native America Calling," a national daily live radio call-in talk show. She is also a frequent contributor to Native Peoples.