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**Redefining the welfare and protection of
Indigenous cultures in America**

HRC

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Forum: The Human Rights Council

Issue: Redefining the welfare and protection of Indigenous cultures in America

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Introduction

The indigenous cultures of America have a long and rich history that is filled with many injustices and many more awful things. This research report will try to tackle this issue by thoroughly explaining the complexities at play and hopefully reach a good solution to the issue of redefining the welfare and protection of Indigenous cultures in America.

Definition of Key Terms

Colonization

The action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of a certain area, often with violence.

Cultural Appropriation

The use of objects or elements of a non-dominant culture in a way that stereotypes or contributes to oppression and does not respect their original meaning or give credit to their source.

Native American

A member of the indigenous people of North, Central, and South America, especially those who originate from what is now known as the USA.

Reservation

An area of land that is reserved for Native American tribes or tribes under treaties or other agreements with the United States.

General Overview

For us to understand and really grasp the issues the Indigenous people in the Americas are living in, we need to take a close look at the wide variety of factors that are at play here. We first have to take a look at the history.

Historical Context

Approximately 13000 to 13500 years ago, a land bridge from Siberia and Asia made it possible for the first humans to reach North America. The Clovis were one of the earliest tribes that arrived in the Americas. They were named after distinct stone tools that were found near Clovis, New Mexico. They were hunter-gatherers and developed spearpoints that were used to hunt animals such as mammoths and bison.

The Mesoamericans (1500 B.C.) are indigenous cultures that came about in parts of Mexico and Central America before the Spanish conquests in the 16th century. They were the first of their kind in this region as they were very organized, had sophisticated monuments and cities, and had many intellectual accomplishments; they could be compared to their American counterparts in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Some of the civilizations that were developed in these areas were the Olmecs, Maya, and Aztecs. The Maya brought many inventions forth, such as astronomy, mathematics, calendar making, and hieroglyphic writing.

Another example of how far along some of these cultures were was the Incas (around 1450-1550). They were based in the Andes Mountains in South America, and they were one of the most powerful empires before the discovery of America by the Europeans. They developed very advanced agricultural techniques and methods, such as terrace farming and irrigation systems. They had an extensive road network and even had labor tax to build infrastructure such as temples and roads.

In 1492, a young man called Christopher Columbus set sail to Asia, seeking to find a faster way to arrive there than what was the norm back then, which was going all the way around Africa to get to Asia. He aimed to cross the Pacific Ocean to arrive there, thereby completely miscalculating the circumference of the earth, assuming it was way smaller than it really was. On October 12, 1492, the three Spanish-funded ships, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, made landfall, not in the East Indies, as they wrongly assumed, but on one of the Bahamian islands, likely San Salvador. Europeans had now discovered what quickly would be called the New World. This, however, did not mean that they were the first to get here as there were already around 2 million people living in this

“New Land”. Columbus, wrongfully assuming they were in Asia, called these people: “Indians”, a name that stuck around for a long time after. A passage from his diary reads:

“They... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks’ bells,” he wrote. “They willingly traded everything they owned... They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features... They do not bear arms and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron... They would make fine servants... With fifty men, we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

This piece of writing was only a harbinger of what was yet to come. Columbus’ journey kicked off centuries of exploitation on the American continent. For example, the native Taino population was forced to search for gold and work on plantations and were eventually completely decimated. Within 60 years after Columbus landed, only a few hundred of what may have been 250,000 Taino were left on the island.

During the coming centuries, the Europeans caused catastrophic damage to these Indigenous tribes by fighting constant wars with them, and coupled with that, they brought with them many diseases that the Indigenous bodies were not accustomed to, causing major epidemics where the Indigenous people died from diseases such as the measles, chicken pox, and even the common cold. Estimated to have killed around 90% of the indigenous populations. After these civilizations fell, there was not much that could be done anymore, for the next centuries, the indigenous tribes of the Americas were subject to European terror and oppression.

In the USA, in 1851, the Indian Appropriations Act created what is called the reservation system, tribes were moved to pieces of land where they were told they could farm, but which was often unwanted land where nothing could grow. Here, they were forced to change their culture to fit in more with European culture. The Dawes Act of 1887 reduced the amount of land in control of the Native Americans even more; allotments were made to individual tribal members, and once this was done, the remaining land was sold to white Americans. In the end, Native Americans lost an estimated 62% of their land.

Current Challenges

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These days, many Indigenous people still remain, approximately 56 million to be precise, although it would be very unfair to lump them together into one group as the difference in cultures can be enormous. Due to the systematic oppression that's held on for over 500 years, Native Americans face many issues in this day and age.

There are major wealth disparities between Native Americans and other communities. For example, in the USA, Native American households have 8 cents of wealth for every dollar of wealth the average white American household has. The poverty rate amongst Native Americans is 25.4%, whereas it's 8% for white Americans. This wealth disparity is caused due to many historical and systemic factors. One of the major causes is the forced relocation that happened during the colonization period. Many Native Americans today still live on the same reservations, and this often leaves them with limited resources and economic opportunities. Reservations are often located in very remote areas with limited infrastructure. This makes it hard to attract businesses and, therefore, almost impossible to create sustainable economies. Another major factor is that 16.3% of Native American households are unbanked, this means that they do not use banks or credit cards, and they represent the lowest percentage of unbanked households in the USA. This often happens because of poor credit history or simply distrust of the banking system. Without banks, they rely on non-traditional financial services to cash paychecks. They take out money orders to pay bills and borrow against upcoming paychecks. These services often have very high fees and interest rates, further diminishing the little wealth they have. Another reason why they might be reluctant to use banks is that they often live in remote areas that are very far away from ATMs and financial institutions. Bad internet in these remote places may also limit online banking services.

There are very big healthcare disparities that Native Americans face. Healthcare for Native Americans is mostly funded by the Indian Health Service (IHS), this is an agency of the US federal government. Even though this, on paper, seems like a good idea, it is chronically underfunded, and its per capita health spending is far below the national average. This underfunding limits the availability of medical care for Native communities, especially those that live on reservations. Because many Native Americans live in very rural and remote areas where there aren't many healthcare facilities, they often have to travel very far to find the proper healthcare. This is very time-consuming and very costly, thus forcing them to spend money they don't have. Native communities also experience disproportionate rates of chronic illnesses, like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, with Native Americans having, on average, a life expectancy of 5.5 years less than the US all-race population. This is often linked with poverty, and access to healthy, nutritious food is very

limited. There's often a mistrust in Western medical practices as these clash with their Native healing methods, further leading to more health issues.

Native Americans face very profound mental health challenges, much of which stems from generational trauma. This refers to much psychological trauma that is passed down from generation to generation due to the systematic oppression and the cultural destruction they have faced for the last few centuries. All of this caused high rates of depression and other mental health issues in these communities. These issues are only increased by the disproportionate rates of drug abuse in these communities. This not only causes a chain of more mental and psychological stress for Native Americans but also increases poverty and suicide rates. There is a huge opioid crisis currently affecting the Native American community, with many people getting addicted to these drugs. Currently, there are 13.7 opioid-related deaths per 100,000 Native Americans. Over the last two decades, this number has only increased, and a lot faster than that of the general population, with some studies stating that it has been over 3 times as fast as those of non-Hispanic white people. These mental health issues have culminated in extreme suicide rates; there has been a 20% increase in Native American suicide cases between 2015 and 2020, compared with a less than 1% increase in the general US population.

Another major issue, often overlooked due to other, more severe issues, is the loss of cultural identity in these communities, forced assimilation policies made by the US government played a huge factor in this. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Native children were forced to boarding schools where they were prohibited from speaking their languages or maintaining their spiritual beliefs and cultural customs; this resulted in whole generations being disconnected from their cultural heritage. The consequences of this are very prevalent, now more than ever. Many Indigenous languages have become endangered as only a handful of often old fluent speakers remain. Language is often a huge part of cultural identities, as a loss of them often leads to a loss in oral histories, songs, and rituals. Adding to this, their sacred sites and cultural landmarks are often desecrated by things such as industrial or urban expansion. Cultural appropriation is also an issue that Native communities have to deal with, their symbols, rituals, and attire are often mocked or misrepresented in mainstream media, and in fashion, the exploitation of their culture can come across as highly insulting and disrespectful to these communities, it also strips much of their cultural identity of meaning.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
Approximately 28000 BCE	Paleo-Indians, the ancestors of Native Americans first walk the land bridge between Siberia and the North America, becoming the first humans to get to America
8000 BCE	These first people have now made it across North and South America
1021 CE	The first Europeans, Norse Vikings, reach the North American continent.
October 12, 1492	Christopher Columbus reaches America for the first time, kickstarting colonialism in this region.
May 28, 1830	Passage of the Indian Removal Act, which led to the forced relocation of thousands of Native Americans, which included the infamous Trail of Tears.
November 29, 1864	Colorado citizens attack Cheyenne and Arapaho encampments along Sand Creek, killing and mutilating more than 150 Native Americans, known as the Sand Creek Massacre.
June 2, 1924	U.S Congress passes the Indian Citizenship Act, granting citizenship to all Native Americans who are born in the borders of the United States.
March 4, 1929	Charles Curtis serves as the first Native American vice president under president Hoover.

April 11, 1968

The Indian Civil Rights act is signed into law, granting Native American tribes many of the benefits included in the Bill of Rights.

Major Parties Involved

The American Indian Movement (AIM)

An organization that aims to fully restore tribal sovereignty and treaty rights.

The Indian Health Service (IHS)

An agency that is part of the United States Federal Government that provides healthcare services to American Indians and Alaska Natives.

The United States of America

This is where everything takes place.

Possible Solutions

There are many issues that Native Americans face, and thus, many solutions that can be made, here are some examples.

Firstly, there should be something done about the major health crisis that all Native Americans face. The initiative of establishing the Indian Health Service was a very good one. However, there is still much to be done. Currently, the IHS is chronically underfunded, so that is the first issue that should be fixed, there needs to be a lot more funding for the IHS. With the proper funding, the IHS can start to combat the (mental) health crisis that Native Americans deal with. This way, the IHS can facilitate the making of more hospitals or other health-related facilities that can be closer to the Native American populations, thereby reducing costs for individuals, this will also make sure that Native Americans will be more inclined to go to the hospital as it will be less time consuming to travel there.

There should be clear ways to make sure that Native American culture cannot be appropriated and/or mocked, to do this, people should be taught about their culture so that they can create an appreciation of these people and their values; this will not only grow mutual respect, but this will also make sure that people will think twice before painting Native Americans in a certain light. The government can also pass certain laws and regulations that would make sure that Native American culture can be preserved by, for example, funding language courses for Native Americans who have not been able to learn it.

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