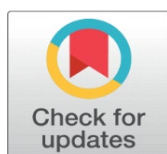


# A SHIFT FROM MYTHOLOGY TO HISTORY: A HISTORICAL AWAKENING OF THE NATIVE

Kalpna Mairembam<sup>1</sup>✉, Dr. H. Subrata Singh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, DM University

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, DM University



## Corresponding Author

Kalpna Mairembam,

[Kalpanamairembam10@gmail.com](mailto:Kalpanamairembam10@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the pivotal role of oral tradition in Native American culture, as embodied in N. Scott Momaday's seminal work, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. By weaving together personal experience, ancestral memories, and verbal narratives, Momaday mounts a compelling challenge to Eurocentric historical documentation, reclaiming Native American identity, culture, and history in the process. Through a critical examination of Momaday's narrative strategies, this study explores how he employs Native aesthetics to transcend the dominant Western epistemological frameworks that have historically marginalized Native American voices. By subverting the traditional boundaries of documented history, Momaday's work offers a powerful counter-narrative that redefines the parameters of historical truth. Furthermore, this paper reexamines the erasure and misrepresentation of Native American culture through Eurocentric documentation, highlighting the ways in which dominant narratives have perpetuated cultural amnesia and historical distortion. By relooking at the intersections of history, culture, and power, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics underlying Native American cultural heritage. Ultimately, this research seeks to illuminate the significance of oral tradition as a vital means of preserving cultural memory, resisting dominant narratives, and reclaiming indigenous epistemologies. By centering Native American voices and perspectives, this study strives to promote a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of American history and culture.

**Keywords:** Oral Tradition, Native American Culture, Mythology, Identity, History, Eurocentric, Documentation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Native American tribes played a pivotal role in shaping the United States through treaty agreements, yet their historical contributions and experiences have been deliberately obscured and distorted. The infiltration of European colonizers into Native American communities had a profound impact on the identity and history of indigenous peoples. European and Euro-American colonizers viewed Native Americans as "savage," "bloodthirsty," "godless," and "stupid," dismissing their cultural practices as "superstitions." Under the guise of "civilization," Euro-Americans sought to assimilate Native Americans into English-speaking, Christian farmers, erasing their cultural heritage in the process. This dichotomy between civilization and exploitation was justified as "civilization" by Euro-Americans, perpetuating a legacy of colonialism and

Our knowledge from a native perspective is that the story begins with American acceptance of tribal self-government and nation to nation diplomacy through treaty making. Thus treaty making was used as a tool of diplomacy. Regarding the treaties, it is written in the United States Constitution article 6, clause 2:

“This Constitution, and the laws of the United States which shall be made in pursuance of thereof; and all Treaties made or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the land.”

But the irony is, later American politicians were devoted to the extreme verge of extinction. The ultimate focus of the U.S government was upon the assimilation of the Native people into white culture. The civilization regulations civilized everything that was traditional or customary in Indian life, like the rules that banned ‘the Sun Dance’, ‘Long Hair Prohibition’, banning of Ponies and children were being taken to boarding schools from parents. And parents were not to be interfered with the ‘progressive education of the children’. This boarding schools acted as a metaphor of colonialism to shape the mindset of the young native. This educating of children is nothing but what Antonio Gramsci called ‘institutional and cultural bases of ideology’. The ideas of white culture was institutionalized in the civil society of native’s children through educational systems while the ultimatum was assimilation.

It turn out as one side to own the riches of the so called “New World” and the other struggled to hold on to traditional homelands and ways of life. And those treaties were valued only for paper, and their interpretations and emphasis may change over the years. The difference is that the native dealt at the level of the human voice. And this humble and sincere side of the native was used as an advantage for their diplomatic objective. In an interview with Vine Deloria Jr. by Suzan Shown Harjo, he gives emphasis on the oratory in treaty making protocol, he said,

“When Indians gave their word and smoked in the pipe, they sent the smoke to tom the creator. It was sacred and the treaty was good in the eyes of all...”

Similarly N Scott Momaday, an internationally Kiowa poet, novelist, artist, storyteller, and former professor of English and American literature also said on the importance of oratory or oral tradition of Native America is being used to grip onto their identity and history, ‘the Indians were the spoken words, represented the spoken word’. This oral tradition served in cultural transmission, their beliefs, histories and everything for the native people. And thus their histories depend on oral records.

N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* narrates the journey of his Kiowa ancestors from their Montana origins to their defeat and resettlement near Rainy Mountain. However, the book transcends a mere historical account by deconstructing Kiowa history through a blend of myth, memory, and imagination. By resisting Eurocentric genres, Momaday successfully recreates Native aesthetics within the English language. He draws authenticity from the landscape rather than relying on documented historical facts. His writing is deeply rooted in the historical, cultural, and social experiences of his people. Momaday's work is characterized by its native perspective, drawing from his ancestors' experiences and his own cultural knowledge. This approach harmonizes Native thought and writing, offering a genuine reflection of Native communities. By incorporating Kiowa myth, Momaday rewrites history and reveals the oral cultural narrative, challenging dominant European and Euro-American documentation.

In the book *The Way to Rainy Mountain* N. Scott Momaday embarks on a profound journey that extends beyond the physical realm. Through the realms of mind and imagination, he transcends into a spiritual odyssey, bridging his ancestral past and present. This introspective quest enables him to recreate the history of the Kiowas, weaving together fragments of memory, myth, and cultural heritage. The journey of the mind as mentioned by Momaday in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*,

“...legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural. And the journey is an evocation of three things in particular: a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit, which endures,” (Scott Momaday p.4)

The book is divided into three parts: “The Setting Out”, “The Going On”, and “The Closing In”, with a Prologue, Introduction and an Epilogue at the end. The book opened with a poem entitled “Headwaters” which narrates how the Kiowas emerged from the underworld through a hollow log, ‘A log, hollow and weather stained’. The Prologue and the Introduction part is based upon on accounts which was narrated to him by his grandmother ‘Aho’. In the Introduction part, Momaday gives emphasis on the landscape in the early morning,

"To look upon the landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this you think is where creation was began". (*Scott Momaday, p.5*)

The indigenous people, despite being nomadic hunters, lived in harmony with their environment, posing no threat to the land's ecological balance. Their survival depended on animals, yet they coexisted in a symbiotic relationship, embracing a holistic view of the land and their surroundings. This profound connection with nature is reflected in Momaday's writing, where geographical landmarks serve as a testament to authenticity, diverging from the European tradition of documenting historical facts.

The first part "The Setting Out", talks about the origin of Kiowa's myth and oral narrative which was ultimately reached to the formation of their identity. In the second part "The Going On", narrates stories of Kiowas, their glory and success, their history, full of wisdom. In the third part "The Closing In", is all about the decline of Kiowas.

Oral narratives is everything for the native people, the root for them is derived from their oral tradition. For them the specific story might be narrated by different storytellers and through their mystical nature, it always give a room to improve their culture. By writing in English language with beliefs and imagination along with the native aesthetics, he interprets history by abundant used of their myth and legend. The origin of Kiowas, its small number and its reason behind is that they came out through a hollow log and there was a pregnant woman who got stuck in the log. This made no one could get through and Kiowas are thus small tribe in number and they called themselves Kwuda, "coming out".

While making and revisiting history from myth, Momaday adds his personal comments and experiences; his memory and imagination. In the first part "The Setting Out", the myth told how the Kiowas had need of dogs. There was a lone helpless man, who could not think of way to say himself from his enemies. At that time the dog asked if the man could take care of her puppies, she would show him how to get away. And the man was safe, and thus the dog was primordial. And relating to this the main warriors of Kiowas was the Kaitsenko, "Real Dogs", and it was made up of ten men only, the ten most brave. This myth is commented by Momaday from his personal experiences in order to show the changes of now and then in the Kiowa culture, he says,

"There were always dogs about my grandmother's house. Some of them were nameless and lived a life of their own. They belonged there in a sense that the word "ownership" does not include. The old people paid them scarcely any attention, but they should have been sad, I think, to see them to go". (*Scott Momaday, p.21*)

Momaday made the myth of Kiowas authenticated by adding personal experienced and from anthropologist point of view. In the myth of how the Kiowas girl married with Sun and how the Sun killed the woman and left the child. There was a plant called '*pomme Blanche*' or '*pomme de prairie*'. The root was a healthful food and there was attempts to cultivate the plant as substitute for potato. But it was failed even if they tried, Kiowas seemed to be born as nomadic and meat eaters. Regarding this Momaday adds an account on what the anthropologist Mooney wrote in 1896:

"Unlike the neighboring Cheyenne and Arapaho, who yet remember they once lived east of the Missouri and cultivated corn, the Kiowas have no tradition of ever having been an agricultural people or anything but tribe of hunting". (*Scott Momaday, p.25*)

This tradition of Kiowas being a hunter rather than a cultivator of plants and grains, is again connected with Momaday's personal experiences:

"My grandmother, Mammedaty, worked hard to make wheat and cotton grow on his land, but it came to very little in the end...I have heard that the old hunters of Plains prized the raw liver and tongue of buffalo above all other delicacies". (*Scott Momaday, p.25*)

Momaday rewrites history by amalgamating myth and personal experience, imagination and memory is beyond the Eurocentric documentation of history and its way of writing. Their history is transpersonal and shared by all in the form of oral tradition. It is spiritual in the sense that the shared history contains not only the ancestral pat but their inherited memory. The memory traces which had evolved countless generations resulting from their ancestral past experiences. This is what Carl Jung called the "collective unconsciousness". To relate how the Kiowas shared the collective unconsciousness through their myth, the account on how the Tai-me belonged to the Kiowas s worth mentioning. When the Kiowas were hungry and there was a man who was in search of food. It was when Tai-me appeared and said to take him with the man and he would give whatever he wanted. This myth of Tai-me, the fetish, the spiritual amulet is shared collectively by the Kiowas and they felt as if they were interconnected with Tai-me. By

adding Momaday's personal experience to see the Tai-me bundle with father and grandmother, he felt and said:

"...I made an offering of bright red cloth, and my grandmother prayed aloud. It seemed a long time that we were there. I had never come into the presence of Tai-me before nor have I since. There was a great holiness all about in the room, as if an old person had died there or a child had been born". (*Scott Momaday, p.37*)

In the second part of the book "The Going On" talks about the Kiowa's history and triumph. It was the peak of Kiowas, it was the time of bravery and wit. It was the time where the myth magnified the Kiowas, of best arrow maker. There was a myth in which "fire" saved from enemies, and it represents the wits of Kiowas:

"If you fed us all, we will not harm you...when he (husband) was well away (from their enemies), he called out in the voice of a bird. The woman knew that it was time to go. She set fire to the fat and threw it all around upon the enemies...from a safe distance they could see the fire and hear the screams of their enemies." (*Scott Momaday, p.44*)

In the book memory is blended with imagination. It is well known in the myth of Kiowa that they are the best arrow maker. The myth of Kiowa told how they made fine arrows and straightened them in their teeth and drew them to the bow to see if they were straight. In the myth there was a man and his wife alone at night in their tipi and the man was making arrows. He man knew that there was two men hiding outside the tipi and asked if they were Kiowa, they would understand what he was saying, and they would speak their name. But no answer came and the man's arrow went directly to the enemy's heart. The man gave emphasis to the words of Kiowa, spoken words were the point of knowledge that he could trust. This myth is again blended with his own memory and imagination, with a lean old man in braids called Cheney. He was an arrow maker. Momaday imagines and sees Cheney as if he were there now and his voice went on the rolling grasses and where the sun came up on the land. Like the New Historicists argue that effective subversion of power structure by individual is a myth, Momaday used the Kiowa's myth as tool to relook the history and foreground by an effective blending of individual's memory and imagination.

In the third part of the book "The Closing In", talks about the decline of Kiowas, the changes, certain restraints which brought to the diminution of Kiowas. In the end of the book in the Epilogue part, Momaday admiringly mention an elderly woman who is a figure of cohesive native experience, who spoke of the Sun Dance. This elderly woman is the one who brought Momaday in unison of memory, oral tradition, he said:

"The memory and the verbal tradition which transcends it were brought together for me once and for all in the person of Ko-sahn". (*Scott Momaday, p.86*)

According to the post structuralist cultural historian Michel Foucault, "the state is the panoptic view of everything happen with the society". The state authority is all knowing and seeing and organized the multiple powers to manipulate in everything whether in convention, education, whether directly or not in order to exercise the society, this is the Panoptic power of the state. And the historian is not free from this power of state, and thus the history of native in the American continent was annulled. This pervasive power influences historians, resulting in the erasure of Native American history in the American continent. This notion of 'people without history' and misinterpretations of native is challenged by the coming **Mountain** is indeed a way to recreate the European and Euro-American documented narrative and history which was represented to the world. Of indigenous writers. Momaday revealed the peculiar native tradition and cultural practices through his works. He shows the native experience which is governed by memories, the identity, their perspectives and the importance of oral tradition in making their history. The book **The Way to Rainy Mountain** is indeed a way to recreate the European and Euro-American documented narrative and history which was represented to the world.

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