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## **Effects of colonization on the native folklore of America:**

### **A study of selected prose narratives**

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## **Abstract:**

America as a continent have been colonized multiple times by different colonizers like Britishers, Spanish, French and Dutch people. Slavery of the African people also made a large population of black people in the state of America. Before the colonization America had different Indian tribes as its native population with their own culture and folklore. This paper is an attempt to explain the adaptation process of native Indians to the new ideas of origin myths that came with the colonizers and how the native folklore myths and these new myths are co-existing in the American folklore. This paper will address the question with the help of selected prose narratives about the origins of mankind in the American native Indian tribes.

**Keywords:** American Prose Narratives, Native Indian myths, American colonization, adaptation of the new culture



## Introduction:

The history of American Civilization is only a few hundred years old if one counts only outsiders who came there as frontiers and early settlers. The American continent witnessed many different colonies settle down its land. These colonies came here on the newfound land which was preoccupied with different Indian tribes. Early settlers either fought wars with them or baptized the native folks and included them in their colonies. For instance, the war between Spanish people and native Catio Indians in Columbia ended as Catio Indians fled into the mountains and cut off themselves from the civilization forever or how British colonizers baptized the whole Micmac Indian population.

This colonization affects native folklore twice in the history of American folklore. The first time when the colonizers came and changed the whole native tribe lifestyle of the people including their religion, food habits, customs and ritual, festivals and language and folklore. The second time was when the folklore as a branch of anthropology and later on as an independent discipline itself in America. Folklore of Indian Tribes was not considered worthy enough to be collected by the folklorists and even if someone does it he has to face negative criticism from the society. This whole issue about the collection of American Indian folklore is briefly mentioned in the work of W.K. McNeil he states this issue as -

“By the nineteenth century the American Indian was, for many, no longer an exotic or noble figure but a pagan who represented a potentially corrupting influence on civilized man. Certainly, his traditions could not be tolerated as having any place in history, even his own history. Furthermore, those who chose to use folklore in elucidating history were generally labelled credulous believers in heathen traditions.”  
(McNeil 31)

The whole native American history was not considered worthy enough to be mentioned in the history books. Although in the later part of the nineteenth century this hypocrisy ended. In 1810 John Gottlieb Ernestus Heckewelder wrote the work *Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations, Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania*. One of the first aimed



attempts was to record American Indian folklore and history. Although its publication took place after nine years.

Even after folklorists started to collect native Indian folklore there were two types of fieldwork that happened. The first one is Englishman directly collecting the Indian folklore into English or in European languages. Or the second one is when they translate the native languages into English with the help of interpreters. In these initial stages of collection folklorists aimed to collect the original content from the natives. Here original means before the colonial culture's interaction with the natives. This whole process and development are explained in the work of Franz Boas's *Mythology and Folk-Tales of the North American Indians* where he talked about the folklore of north American Indians from the field works done by folklorists in chronological order and then about the folklore content itself. Boas talks about the point of view of folklorists who were working in the field of collecting the content and their preference for the content which was unaffected by the colonizers. Boas states-

“This static view of Indian folk-lore is also expressed by the preference given throughout to the collection of purely Indian material unaffected by European or African elements, and by the reluctance of investigators to bestow as much care upon the gathering of the more recent forms of folk-lore as is given to those forms that were current before the advent of the whites” (Boas 376.)

This paper is an attempt to seek the hidden details of the effects of colonization on different tribes of American Indians. How they adapted the colonial culture in their way. Folk literature is generally considered an honest account of the events because of its characteristics. Selection of the prose narratives done from a single collection. Tales are regionally different from each other and the native tribe of each tale is different, which gives a wider spectrum to understand the objective of the paper.

### **Tale of Atam and Im from Thompson Indians**

The first prose narratives taken into account for this research is coming from the regions of Columbia where the Thompson Indian tribe exists. This tale belongs to the Thompson Indian folk literature. the tale is known as 'Atam and Im' the first man and woman on the earth. This



tale is originally collected and published in the book *Mythology of the Thompson Indians* by James A. Teit in 1864. The present version is a retelling of the tale done in the work *The Rainbow book of American Folktales and Legends* by Maria Leach published in 1958.

This folktale is a tribal version of the story about Adam and Eve the Christian mythological characters created by God Himself as His finest creation the first man and woman of the world. This particular folktale narrates the story of Atam the first man and Im the first woman, after their arrival on the earth. At the beginning of the tale, God is referred to as 'Chief' which is a post of the head in the tribal people and seitan or the devil is addressed as the 'Outcast'. This indicates the timeline of this particular tale. The incident which is narrated in the tale took place after God outcasted lucifer in the underworld because of the revolt he did against God.

This tale also deals with the creation myth of flora and fauna. This tale deals with the horse in particular. How the devil created the horse to harm Atam and Im but God came to save them from it and ordered the horse to be a servant to the humans from now on. God gave the horse a long hairy tale and a thick mane to help him with the mosquitoes biting. After this failed attempt the Devil came back pretending to be God and gave pine three fruits to eat. Until now God has not specified what to eat and what not to eat. Devil took advantage of it and tempted the Im to eat pine tree fruit. She ate the fruit and because of this all the pine fruits became cones and big fruits in the bushes become berries. Then when the real chief came, he saw all this and became angry with the Im. He sent her to the underworld to live with the outcast and then created another woman from the rib of the Atam. Maria Leach notes

“This is the way Thompson River Indians of the Southern British Colombia told their story about the first man and woman after they had heard the white man tell this. The north-westward spread if the horse from the plains was slow; these people probably did not possess horses much before 1840” (279)

This single statement from the collected denotes the origin of the tale which is not the tribal folklore but the colonial knowledge and mythology conveyed by the white men who came there and spread their knowledge, belief and mythology into the tribes of Thompson



Indian. They, later on, adapted the base of the tale and created their version out of it. The fact that before the 1840s horse did not own by the tribe makes a mark on the historical timeline of this particular tale as well as the time of the colonization process in British Colombia. This single tale is an indication of the belief change that happened in the native people. These colonial beliefs were not just added to the native folk but they replaced the original native beliefs.

### **Tale of Gluskap from Micmac Indians**

The tale of Gluskap narrates the story of how God created Gluskap a god and hero of the Micmac Indians. The whole myth tale about Gluskap is about how he travelled around the area in a canoe and created various geographical landmarks throughout his journey. The landmarks have special importance in the Micmac community. For instance, three long islands in the straight line near Ann Bay and Great Bras d'Or, Micmac people believe it is the canoe of Gluskap which broke there. In one place Gluskap took his dinner near Great Bras d'Or that place is named Padalodi'tck translated into English as Table Head.

The tale feels very simple and common in the beginning but the tone of the tale flips at the ending part. Leach Narrated the end of the tale as –

“Then one day Gluskap said to the people “I am going away now. The White man is coming. You will all be baptized, but I am going where white man cannot find me.” So, he departed. “But if you need me, in time of war” he said as he was leaving, “if you need me, call, and I’ll come back” (Leach 288)

Their native god left them because colonizers were coming and he doesn't want to see his people converting their religion and leaving their native culture behind. Gluskap also mentioned a war between natives and white men (colonizers). This tale shares the experience of the first generation of the Micmac Indians who fall into the colonization process. The words of Gluskap about he will come to help their people in the time of war indicates that one day there will be rebellion against the white man that leads to a war between natives and colonizers. Gives hope to the native minds that one day they will be free from the outsiders. The whole religious oppression either forcefully or by tempting the native into the hope of a so-called



batter lifestyle. Colonizers baptized the native Indian tribes just as the Africans in their region or any other country. Maybe any native Micmac is never opposed to this but the inner emotions always find their way into the folk literature.

### **Tale of Jesús Cristo from Chimalteco Indian**

The creation myth is not the only one which was adapted by the American Indian tribes. The tale of Jesús Cristo narrates the whole narrative of Cristine's tale of Jesus Christ the messenger of God and the saviour of humanity. Although the narrative is very different from the original story the plot and events of both the tale are similar. This tale belongs to the Chimalteco Indians from the Central American region of Guatemala.

Tale narrates the story of José and Maria a married couple. José made the earth a flat one, with a sun and a moon so he can see his people. Jesús Cristo the first son of José and Maria. He created mountains and rivers on the flat earth and made it more beautiful and livelier. The devil didn't like the mountain and was enraged to kill Jesús Cristo. After a long forty days chase, they caught Jesús Cristo and made a blind man kill him. Jesús Cristo gave blessings to the blind man for killing him and ending his suffering. Because of this kindness even today people behave kindly to any blind man.

### **Tale of Turkey Girl from Tewa Indians**

Few famous folktales also came with the colonizers to the native population. The tale of the Turkey Girl from New Mexico is a loose adaptation of the Cinderella story. A tale about a girl who does the household works in the family and when one day there is a function in the village she was refused to come with the family. The turkeys gave her a dress and ornament so she can go dancing. Her sister saw her and told her mother about her coming to the dance. The girl's mother scolded her and told her to go back home. She went back home and then decided to leave the home forever she took the turkeys with her and when she found a place to live nearby a lake, she let the turkeys go into the forests. This tale belongs to Tewa Indians, similar tale also can be found in the Zuñi Indians their tale is very similar to the original English Cinderella story.



## **Tale of The Lincoln Totem pole from Tlingit Indian**

The local legend tells about the Totem pole that was made as a tribute and respect to the president of America Abraham Lincoln around the time of 1867. The tale narrates the story of an old rivalry between two Tlingit Indian tribes in the Tongas Islands on the coast of Alaska. There were two rival clans the Eagle clan and the Raven clan. When colonizers came to America they came here with their African slaves and they introduced the concept of slave trading to the native people. Eagle clan was a powerful one in both the clan and they took advantage of the slavery by selling war prisoners of the raven clan as slaves and became wealthy out of it. For many years these native people of the Raven clan suffered as slaves. Then at last in 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation came and in 1865 it was enforced as the thirteenth Amendment it was enforced ending the whole slavery tradition. in 1867 Tlingit Indians came under the jurisdiction of the U.S.A. making them free from slavery.

Totems in their tradition are usually made for their gods, but for the first-time raven clan of the Tongas, made a totem pole for a human being. This shows how many generations of native Indians suffered in the whole slave tradition which was not established by them but came with the colonizers. The Lincoln Totem pole has still persevered in the Illinois State Museum in Springfield.





## Conclusion

Colonization affected the native Indian lifestyle in each corner of the American continent. different tribes reacted differently to the colonization, some fought, some fled out of their native lands, some converted themselves, and some took advantage of it. These lifestyle changes can be seen in the folk literature of these tribes. With the new culture and knowledge which came with the outsiders, these native people adapted it in their way. This research is limited to the prose narratives of these native tribes but in future, a similar study can be done with different forms of folk literature.



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