

A Cheyenne Odyssey Myths and Misconceptions

*Below are some common misunderstandings about Native American history, as well as some stereotypes that persist today. Each of the bolded statements is **incorrect**.*

1. Myth: “Native American” is the correct term for American Indians.

When we talk about big groups of people, like different races or ethnicities, there usually isn't just one label we can use to describe the entire group. Instead, we have many words, like "white" or "Caucasian" for some people, and "Black" or "African American" for others. But it's important to remember that individual members of those groups might prefer one word over another.

There was a time when the word "Native American" became more popular and more frequently used than other terms. Nowadays, it's common for both Native Americans and people who aren't Native to use words like "American Indian," "Native American," or "Indigenous."

It's a good idea to use the names of specific tribes, like "Northern Cheyenne," "Lakota," or "Crow," when you can, because it's more accurate.

2. Myth: Native Americans were “savage” and “bloodthirsty,” and hated all white people.

Native American tribes, just like Europeans, usually wanted what was best for their own people. How they felt about white people depended on different things at a particular place and time. For example, did white people recently attack or harm their tribe? Were they keeping their promises in agreements with them? Were they being honest in their talks with them? These were the questions that made a difference.

Many tribal leaders only wanted to go to war as a last option, when there was no other choice. Sometimes, tribes that were seen as "hostile" or against the white people changed their minds and started working with the United States.

For example, the Cheyenne had good relationships with white people from 1800 to the 1850s. But by the 1860s, things had changed, and the white settlers thought of the Cheyenne as one of the most "savage" and warlike Plains Indian tribes.

3. Myth: All Native Americans lived in tipis and hunted buffalo.

The history and way of life of Native Americans were quite different from one tribe to another, depending on where they lived and the time period. For example, the Hopi people in the Southwest lived in houses made of adobe and were farmers. On the other hand, some Alaska Native people lived in houses made of cedar planks and relied on the ocean for their food.

Just like we can't say there's one way of being African, Asian, or European, we also can't say there's one way of being an American Indian. It's best to be specific and not make generalizations about them as a whole group.

"A Cheyenne Odyssey" tells the story of the Northern Cheyenne people between 1860 and 1900. During that time, the Cheyenne led a nomadic life on the Great Plains, living in tipis and hunting buffalo. But it's important to know that they didn't always live like that, and they live differently today.

4. Myth: Native Americans lived in peace until the arrival of European settlers.

Native American tribes moved around and settled in various parts of the Americas long before European settlers came in the 1500s and 1600s. Disputes over land, expansion of trade routes, and differences in language and culture often led Indian tribes to fight with each other. But, before the Europeans arrived, these battles and disagreements, while challenging, didn't usually put any tribe in danger of disappearing.

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5. Myth: Native Americans are a dying race.

Some white people think that Native Americans are a "vanishing race," meaning they're almost gone from North America. It's true that millions of Native Americans died from disease, hunger, and war as a result of white settlers moving onto their lands.

But Native Americans haven't disappeared. In the 2020 US census, almost 10 million people said they are American Indian (either just American Indian or along with other races). That's about 3% of the whole population. Instead of going away, Native Americans are actually one of the groups growing the fastest in the United States. American Indians live all over the United States, but the largest numbers of them live in Arizona, California, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Texas, North Carolina, Alaska, Washington, South Dakota, and New York. American Indians can be found in all sorts of jobs, like doctors, lawyers, teachers, professors, actors, and professional athletes.

In 2023, there were 12,266 members of the Northern Cheyenne tribe. About 6,012 of them live on the reservation centered in Lama, Montana, near the Tongue River.

Sources: Walter C. Fleming, "Myths and Stereotypes About Native Americans," http://www.pdkmembers.org/members_online/publications/Archive/pdf/k0611file.pdf; David Walbert, "Who Owns the Land?," <http://www.davidwalbert.com/pdf/learnnc/who-owns-the-land-p2027.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, American Indian and Alaska Native, <https://www.census.gov/about/partners/cic/resources/data-links/aian.html>; U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, <https://www.bia.gov/frequently-asked-questions>