

NATIVE INTELLIGENCE
A Column By
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This column's focus: The Colonialism of Names

Many non-Native scholars and government officials continue the practice of giving names to First American locations, towns, reservations, tribes, languages, cultures, and new bio-linguistic groupings without giving the least thought to asking First Nations People what they would like or what name they already are using. This would seem to be the height of arrogance wherein outsiders see Native People as objects or like dogs, cats and horses which can be named at will by their owners.

I once had a white male archaeology student in one of my classes who made fun, in his evaluation of me, of the fact that I used the expression "Indian People" frequently instead of "Indians." The difference is, I think, that when one says "Indian People" one makes it clear that one is speaking of living, real human beings, not simply specimens or objects.

Anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists, and geographers are among the greatest sinners. For example, they delight in referring to the Bering Strait, the Bering Sea, and the Bering Land Bridge (Beringia) without pausing to recall that Vitus Bering brought Russian imperialism and enslavement to Alaska with a huge loss of American life and much suffering from extremely brutal treatment. Why should a man like Bering be honored when quite obviously the Yupik, Aleut, and other Native Americans had names for their region? Why don't Europeans take the step of finding out the original names for things? Why do they give murderers and imperialists the honor of having all kinds of places named after them (such as Coronado National Forest, De Soto National Forest, the District of Columbia, the Columbia River, the Sea of Cortes, Lake Champlain, etc.).

I believe that it is because of a racist, denigrating attitude toward indigenous peoples coupled with a view of themselves as the exalted conquerors of all which they may survey.

Some years ago the term "Amerind" was abbreviated from the already shortened "Amerindian," an ugly word coined by the British I believe to refer to the American peoples of Trinidad, Guyana, and the Antilles where Indians from India had been brought in as low-wage laborers. To avoid confusion with the proper Indians the "Amerindian" term was introduced. Later its use spread to some white people in North America. We should carefully note, however, that the continent of America was not renamed "Amerindia" and thus the Amerindians were still left without a land to correspond to their new name. Heaven forbid that they should be called Americans or Native Americans !

More recently a linguist named Joseph H. Greenberg, working together with Christy G. Turner II and Stephen L. Zegura, has divided our indigenous American peoples into three separate populations which he labels "Amerind," "Na-Dene" and Eskimo-Aleut. The Amerind group includes most of our nations from Canada through southernmost South America. The Na-Dene group consists exclusively in groups speaking Athapaskan-related languages, while Eskimo-Aleut presumably includes all groups speaking languages of that family. These three populations are proposed as being different both linguistically and genetically and the three are said to be part of separate super-language families found in Eurasia.

Greenberg et al have arrogantly named most of us "Amerinds" without , however, giving us the land of "Amerindia" (as noted). We still cannot have the name of the continent America even 10,000 or 40,000 years before any Europeans came here ! Nor are we to be asked for any alternative names of our own choosing. Shall we, in turn, speak of "Eurams" now? Shall we write about "Eurcans" (European Canadians) or "Francans" (Francophone Canadians)? And we can simply call Europeans "Euros" or better yet "Yuros."

By the way, I asked a Yupik scholar what we should call the Bering Sea and he said "Imakpik" (ee-maak-pik) with the first "k" pronounced like a guttural German or Scotch "ch". It means the "Big Container" and is their name for the Bering Sea. So now we can speak of the Imakpik Route and Imakpikia instead of Beringia!

Isn't it time to throw off the names of colonialism and to insist that indigenous peoples be treated as human beings worthy of respect ? Perhaps we need to rename our reservations, our towns, our tribes (as the Ho-Chunk Nation has done) and then rename the languages, archaeological sites, and mountains

and rivers. Maybe that will help to give Native People a sense once again of being in control of one's own destiny.[April 29, 1996]

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(Professor Forbes is the author of ONLY APPROVED INDIANS,
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