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The earliest American Indians are thought to have been Eurasian, crossing the Bering Strait at a time when it was available during the glacial period. The number of tribes grew through the centuries, with various tribes traveling and settling in various parts of the Americas (Porter 63). Of course, it is common knowledge that the general term “Indian” was provided by Christopher Columbus who thought that he had succeeded in traveling around the world and arriving at the coast of India. Much thought has been given to the nomenclature for this indigenous group. However, to refer to American Indians as “red-skinned” is considered racist, to the point that sports teams named the “Red Skins” are facing social criticism and pressure to change their names.

One of the most well-known among the Native American tribes is the Sioux, also referred to as being part of the First Nations, a recognized minority group in Canada. The Sioux Nation is divided into three major groups. They are distinguished geographically as well as through language dialect. These people were Nomadic in nature, following the buffalo as a source for food, clothing, and shelter. They were introduced to horses by the Europeans who brought them over during the 1500’s, increasing the mobility of the Sioux Indians. However, at some point, the Sioux settled into certain regions of North America, and a fierce battle for land ensued between settlers originating from Europe and the Native Americans. Artifacts preserved and put on display at the Gilcrease Museum offer insight into the life style and habits of the Sioux Indians, including construction of shelters and clothing, diet, social interactions, and religion (Wade 73).

The Sioux Indians were a highly spiritual people, believing that all of nature was endowed with a spirit (Barrett 63). They worshipped different spirits for various reasons. For example, The White Buffalo Woman was believed to have provided each tribe with a Medicine Pipe. When smoked, this sacred pipe would allow the individual to see visions that would permit the individual to communicate with the spirits for insight and guidance (Porter 72). However, the Sioux considered the Thunderbirds to be the strongest or most powerful of all spirits, save the Great Spirit. They thought of the Great Spirit as superior to and controlling of all other spirits. The Sioux who lived in the Dakotas were a little more settled than their counterparts who lived on the plains and prairies. One result is that they constructed tall, slender wooden poles which they adorned with clothing, feathers, painted skins, and animal skulls to represent the various spirits that they worshiped (Morand 72). Although the poles bring to mind totem poles, they are not actually considered totem poles. However, they were used in various religious ceremonies involving worship of the spirits.

Another well-known group of American Native tribes is referred to as the Cherokee Nation. They migrated in earlier times from the Great Lakes region to the southeastern part of the United States, which included the states of Georgia and the Carolinas. Because they did originate from the Great Lakes area, they brought with them the language of the Iroquois. Unlike the Sioux Indians, the Cherokee settled into a region and grew crops. They believed in different spirits, in particular the spirits associated with the sun and moon, which they associated with the growing and harvesting of crops (Morand 83). In addition, they thought of the morning star as an evil spirit that had escaped to the sky with shiny crystals (Wade 43). They also believed in an after-life.

The Cherokee belief system often involves certain numbers and colors. For example, the number 4 is important because it refers to the directions north, south, east, and west (Porter 94). The number 7 is important because not only does it include those four directions, but it also adds the Upper World, Lower World, and the place on Earth. Various colors are associated with these directions. Additionally, the number 7 was considered the highest number, representing purity and sacredness. This number was thought of as very difficult to attain. The Cherokee perceived the owl and the cougar as having attained that number; therefore, those two animals were greatly respected. Also reaching that level of purity were the cedar and spruce trees, holly, and laurel. Cedar in particular was considered sacred, represented by the colors red and white.

The Cherokee Nation consists of seven clans (Gagnon 94). Members of each clan are thought to be related as brothers and sisters. For that reason, marrying within the clan is considered forbidden and disgusting in nature. Moreover, anyone who seeks guidance or medical help must report to what clan he or she belongs. Many other traditions also involve clan identity, such as seating at ceremonial dance stomps. Furthermore, each clan is known for certain personality traits or specific abilities. One clan is associated with medicine, while another tends to those who are displaced, such as orphans. Another clan is known for their athletic ability and thought of as hunters. Another clan is responsible for maintaining the land.

The Cherokee people are also noted for their hospitality. They welcome strangers. Anyone who is hungry is expected to eat without being first invited to do so. Furthermore, Cherokees do not believe in being compensated for food or overnight lodging.

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