

Representation of Native American Cultures in the Study of Cabeza de Vaca

By Dr. Jill Hoffman

One of the most interesting aspects of Cabeza de Vaca's journey in North America is his time spent with Indian tribes. It is fascinating to read his descriptions of their cultures and the ways in which he lived among them. But what is even more remarkable is the way in which he regarded the Native people. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Cabeza de Vaca believed that indigenous people should be treated humanely and with respect. And as some scholars explain, it was exactly because of his attitude towards Indian people that Cabeza de Vaca was later maligned and imprisoned.

Thoughtful consideration is needed as we try to understand the Native people depicted in Cabeza de Vaca's account. Many non-Natives tend to classify *all* Native people into one category. Yet, there were many different Native people who crossed paths with Cabeza de Vaca, so it is vitally important that an emphasis be made on the distinct tribal names and cultures of the Native people included in the *Relacion*. The Spaniards were not treated in the same manner by all of the Indians they met; treatment varied from tribe to tribe. Cabeza de Vaca and his fellow expedition members experienced a range of attitudes from the many Native communities within which they found themselves—cruelty, joy, sharing, selfishness, etc.—characteristics of Spaniards, and any other human being. To describe the actions of one of group of Indian people does not describe the actions of all Indian people.

It is also important to keep in mind that the Indians Cabeza de Vaca met did not *begin* their existence upon “discovery” by the Spaniards. These and other Indian cultures had already been in existence—and in some cases had flourished as sophisticated builders, traders, and artists—long before Cabeza de Vaca began his journey in Florida.

It should also be emphasized that Native cultures—Indian people—have continued into the present day. At this time, there are some 500 Native American tribes in the United States, and others are still attempting to receive official acknowledgement by the US government. As Native communities continue today to struggle for federal recognition; strive for repatriation of human remains and treaty rights; and as they try to preserve cultural traditions and document their histories, those who discuss Native cultures should be careful to reflect an awareness that Indian people and Indian cultures continue, existing in distinct and varied numbers. Indians are not only of the past.

Since contact with Europeans, Native Americans have often been labeled: slave workforce; “savage”; “noble savage;” artifacts of a dying culture; curio; souvenir. Many Indian cultures are understood only as stereotypes perpetuated through television, film, fictional literature, and art. Despite misunderstanding of their culture and history at the hands of the “dominant culture,” Native people continue to live their lives, maintaining cultural practices, and forming traditions. Many Native American people in the United States are challenged with living their lives in two worlds: managing co-existence of traditions of their cultural heritage and managing life within contemporary society. In

some cases, current federal policies continue to impact Native Americans in negative ways. (And it should be understood that Indians are the only culture group in the United States that must contend with federal legislation that directly mandates issues related to their religion, arts and crafts, proof of heritage, etc.) However, for those new to the study of Indian cultures, the important point is that Indian cultures—Indian people—have endured.

Reading Cabeza de Vaca's account of his journey and his struggle to survive is fascinating in part because it is hundreds of years old. Yet despite the years that separate his existence and our own we are able to connect with him, understanding the timeless, unchanging emotions that make up the experience that we call life.

But, regarding Indian people it seems Cabeza de Vaca was ahead of his time. As this is written at the beginning of the New Millennium in 2003, hundreds of years of Indian history since first contact reflect a continuing struggle for respect, understanding, and equitable treatment by those who are outside of Native culture—the very things Cabeza de Vaca called for in 1555.