

The Enchanted Mirror: When the Pawnees Became Indians

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CHAPTER NINE

The Past and Future of Racial Indianhood in Pawneeland

Indian history is most appropriately defined as the history of racial Indianhood. It encompasses the study of the promulgation and practice of race, and it most directly concerns the history of adherents to racial Indianhood. This definition of Indian history is based on the idea that we should treat race as a cultural behavior traceable in history, not as a biological reality springing from time immemorial.

The traditional American makers of Indian history have always had a different agenda in mind. The purpose of traditional Indian history in America is to perpetuate the illogic of biological race. This traditional way of enacting race does not countenance very well the truth of race as culture; it does not recognize as Indian the many people in the world who have been touched by the culture of racial Indianhood; it has little regard for those who have engaged in the cultural doings of racial Indianhood. It believes in Indian blood as the basis of Indianness. It believes that Indian blood has a history that pre-exists the fabrication of race as ideology.

It believes in a lie. Academic historians have a professional obligation to challenge and make sense of history that tells lies. The creation of conclusions based on the careful study of evidence is an imperative that cannot be lightly set aside in the doing of historical scholarship.

There can be no Indians in this kind of history, only adherents to belief in racial Indianhood. This is a historical phenomenon that history delineates in time. From the point of view of this kind of scholarship, the history of Pawnee Indians is the history of racial identity among the Pawnee people, and Pawnee Indian history goes back only as far as the 18th century. The 1700s saw the congealing of the elements of race in Pawnee country, and it is possible to speak of Pawnee Indians after about 1770, but we are on more secure ground when we see Pawnee Indians after 1790.

It is pointless to seek the ultimate roots of historical Pawnee Indianness in Pawneeland. Instead, those intellectual roots draw us elsewhere. As Ivan Hannaford and many other scholars have shown, gestating race must be traced to Europe. Race was birthed during the age of European colonial expansion. In the course of

colonization, Americans domesticated race and everyone – yes, everyone; not just white people – enlivened race into a vast set of practices and ideas.

The Pawnees absorbed race not just from Europeans; they were greatly influenced by neighboring communities such as the Oto and Omaha. Race flowed like water along the Mississippi and Missouri river basins, carried by many wandering people. The Pawnees felt the coming of race not as an act of conquest, but as a free exchange of ideas about the nature of human diversity. The advent of racial identity in the Pawnee realm, in the Land of the Three Rivers, came as the outcome of complex cultural interactions that cannot be readily reduced to a story of invader white people victimizing helpless Indian people.

Since race is nevertheless ultimately a production of European colonialism, racial Indianhood is most definitely not an ancient Pawnee notion. Beginning as early as the late 18th century and more certainly in the early 19th century, Pawnees became Indians and it appears that this choice was both deliberate and enthusiastic. Looking back from the beginning of the 21st century, we can see many generations of Pawnee Indians in the history of the world. But these are not countless generations extending into time immemorial. Only a relatively few generations of Pawnees have been Indian.

And looking into the future....

Since race has died as a formal scientific means of explaining human biological diversity, what does this mean for the future of racial Indianhood? American society, unlike Pawnee society, was founded entirely upon the precepts of race. American history, unlike Pawnee history, is entirely constituted from fundamental assumptions about race. I might perhaps be indulging a bit of ethnocentrism if I speculate that Pawnees may yet play significant roles in the coming changes as America wrestles with what it means to look beyond a social self-identity built on racial biology. The truth is that the United States has never had a history free of race. But before there were Pawnee Indians, there were Pawnees.

It seems safe to predict the rise of an ever-growing discourse in American society concerning the significance of race as a meaningful cultural system rather than as a useful biological taxonomy. This is clearly a matter that deserves attention. The centrality of race as a means of organizing American culture has historically always been taken for granted and this basic notion has never been a matter of debate. For this reason, given the fact that race is dead as a matter of biological determinism, the future of race as a cultural reality in American society will necessarily differ mightily from the present-day look of race.

Whatever happens to bring about this change and however it looks along the way, it is a certainty that change will come to the social practice of race. This change will impact the Pawnee Nation in many ways.

One important area of impact upon the Pawnee Nation will come through the racially constituted field of US federal Indian law. Practitioners of federal Indian law assume that the political status of Indian tribes is a matter of historical sovereignty, not a matter of race. There is a historical truth here, of course, but it is impossible to reasonably define “Indian tribe” without reference to race. Race sits at the heart of the very notion of an “Indian” nation. The active practice of race as a biological reality is what has always sustained the ongoing construction of “federal Indian law.” The growth of the American nation and its “Indian” sovereign elements happened in partnership with the evolution of the history of the modern ideology of race. Everyone worked together to give rise to this history.

It is only a matter of time until experts in the field of federal Indian law begin to ponder the vast implications of the coming change in American racialism. Many informed people will no doubt get involved in the shaping of newly emerging racial truths and the impact upon the many racially constituted Indian sovereignties in American society. I trust that there will be great need of collaboration and partnership among all the diverse elements of American society as we ponder and debate the issues.

And I trust that some of these voices will be Pawnee.

For the Pawnee world, for the personal inside realms that make up the soul of Pawneeland, what does it mean for us that racial biology is dead as a viable explanation of human biological diversity? Holding up the mirror of selfhood, what will we see as an outcome of this reality?

For the moment we will no doubt continue to see Indians, Pawnee Indians. Every Pawnee alive at the opening of the 21st century had been born into the world of race. Born as Indians, we grew up with race and we went along with being Indian. Red Pride meant racial dignity; it meant that we wanted our kids to be like us. We wanted them to do race like we did it, except better. We didn’t ever want them to look in the mirror and feel ashamed about racial Indianhood and question their Indian identity. They would always be proud Indians; Pawnee Indians.

But now some difficult new questions have come up. Totally unexpected difficult new questions. Knowing the truth about race, do you want to go on doing it? What will you think if the people around you begin to do race differently, or even stop doing it altogether? What will happen to race if many people begin to reject the doing of it? What will the future of race look like? Will it move toward a future without race?

No one can know exactly what answers will appear. Complicated responses will ensue, no doubt. Surely many people will not let go of the familiarity of race, while others will look for other answers.

The social systems that act to enliven race have yet to show any signs of wavering – or even a little trembling – in the face of the scientific truth about race. It

nevertheless seems safe to predict the toppling of those systems in time even though where in time this will become evident is not clear. This means we have time to think about race, to discuss the doing of race, to take deliberate steps toward directions that make sense. As individuals and as a society we must not lightly squander this opportunity by postponing action, by refusing to revisit our familiar acceptance and enactment of race.

Race is an intensely personal thing to do and it's an intensely personal thing not to do. In the end, whatever you choose for yourself, it will feel very private and maybe you don't want anyone to tell you how you should feel in your inside land.

As for me, when I look into the mirror of the future, I see the mirror of the past. Because once upon a time we didn't live with race. And I see in our future the possibility of that same once-upon-a-time.

I somehow see the past in the future and the future in the past....