

# Theories about Turkic vs. European Roots of Native Americans

**Tea CHUMBURIDZE\***

## Abstract

All human beings are interested in their origins and try to account for their existence through creation stories. Creation stories, which commonly explain how people came into existence, how they acquired tools and customs, and why they should act, or not act in certain ways, contain fundamental conceptions of nature, society, and their relations to the world and to one another.

The United States of America is the best example of a country with a melting pot of cultures; it is the most racially and culturally diverse nation on the planet. With its great diversity, the United States contains many peoples with a variety of origin stories. One of the most interesting is that of Native Americans.

The article aims to explore and examine three different approaches regarding the origins of the first immigrants of America – American Indians: views of the Native American tribes about their origin, the approach of Turkish historians' claiming Native Americans Eurasian roots and a newly conducted research by paleogeneticists based on the American Indians' European roots.

**Keywords:** American Indians, origin, genetics

## Tribal Views about Native American Origins

As far as we deal with the scientific research, American Indians have not reviewed and discussed the scientific view about their origin. Their worldview and approaches are not scientific; they are mostly composed of legends and myths. One such assumption is considered to be simplicity itself; according to some historical chiefs they have always been in the Americas; they were created there and have lived ever since. For example, according to Chief Attakullakulla's ceremonial speech to the Cherokee Nation in 1750, they traveled there from "the rising sun" before the time of the Stone Age man. (Ancient Cherokee Origins, n. d.)

All Native American groups formed traditional histories which were passed down orally generation by generation. Each nation has continued to preserve and transmit their rich tribal tradition, including the stories of creation. (Native Peoples of North America, 2007)

## Native American's and Turkic People's Shared Ancestry

Regardless of the stories Native peoples tell about themselves, others have sought explanations of their origins. Some non-Indians have a different explanation, believing

Native Americans are actually related to Turks and Tatars from Asia. The third president of the United States Thomas Jefferson and polymath Constantine Rafinesque demonstrated the genetic similarity between American Indians and Turkic peoples of the Altai region of southern Siberia. Turkish and Muslim historians entered it as a basic fact of history. They have long claimed that American Indians are their genetic cousins. Thomas Jefferson thought that Native Americans were Turks and Tatars coming across the Bering Sea from Asia. (Boorstin, 1948)

Ancient Central Asiatic people, among them the ancestors of Turks, are known to have migrated from their homelands in steps of Central Asia and Siberia to east, west, north and south. (Kaya, n. d.) American Indians have migrated from Asia to their new homelands in the Americas thousands of years ago. Turkish, an Altaic languages, shares living words with some of the native languages of Americas.

Perhaps we can think about a possible cultural and linguistic relationship among these peoples.. As paleoanthropologist Polat Kaya argues, the ancestors of some of Native Americans and the ancestors of Turks and other Altaic people lived in the same or neighboring geographic regions of Central Asia and Siberia. To assess if these groups could have been members of the same people or closely related

\* Ph.D. Student, Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia  
E-mail: tchumburidze@ibsu.edu.ge

people who spoke the same language or closely related languages, Kaya examined a number of key words. He discovered that, the Altaic root words “ata”, “apa” and “ana” and their derivatives are used in considerable number of languages spoken by the Native people of North, Central and South America. These living words can be viewed as “linguistic artifacts” surviving from the language that these ancient people spoke while they were living in Central Asia and Siberia before they were separated some 10 000 or more years ago. (Kaya, n.d., p. 4) Thus, although some members stayed in their homelands in Asia and the others migrated to North America, a shared linguistic heritage endured. (Kaya, n.d., pp. 2-4)

## Do Native Americans also have European Roots?

There are diverse sources of information about the origins and history of the Native Americans, however, recently, an alternative source devised and conducted by some other researchers was the use of structural scientific study. This included the utilization of radio carbon dating of Indian archeological sites and archeo-magnetic dating of material and equipment used by ancient Indians. These methods, have also been used to analyze the DNA<sup>1</sup> of skeletal remains from archeological sites. (Yong, 2013)

Notwithstanding the fact that Native Americans have closer genetic ties to people in Eurasia and the Middle East than previously believed, a new research on 24,000-year-old remains of a young boy from the Siberian village of Mal'ta shows that up to one-third of that ancestry can be traced back to Europe.

During the coldest parts of the last Ice Age, people related to western Eurasians had spread further east and lived in Siberia. Native Americans were mostly descended from East Asia who crossed the land bridge from Siberia to North America about 14,000 years ago. (Aljazeera America, 2013)

So, perhaps two distinct peoples crossed the land bridge separately and met up in North America. We can suggest that “European” as distinct from Turkic group also migrated over the Siberia/Alaska land bridge. Ancestry Indians came to North America from Europe directly, e.g. by crossing Atlantic.

Several tribes living in what is now the United States, most notably the Mandan tribe that is Native to the Dakotas, had European-looking features, including blond hair, when

they were first met by French traders in the 18th century. (Aljazeera America, 2013)

These observations gave rise to the idea that Welsh, Scottish or Viking explorers had pre-Columbian contact with Native Americans—but the truth may be different.

According to paleogeneticist Eske Willerslev, as a result of interconnection and mixing between a branch of East Asians and a branch of western Eurasians, there were created Native Americans.

In 2009, Willerslev's team travelled to the Hermitage State Museum in St. Petersburg in order to collect a DNA sample from one of the Mal'ta boy's arm bones. The team found that DNA from the boy's mitochondria<sup>2</sup> belonged to a lineage called haplogroup U, which is found in Europe and west Asia but not in east Asia, where his body was unearthed. Willerslev assumed that his sample had been contaminated with other genetic material, and put the project on hold for a year. (Yong, 2013)

As Willerslev stated, genetically this individual didn't have east Asian resemblance but looked like Europeans and people from west Asia, however, there were signatures that can only be seen in today's Native Americans, which is consistent among peoples from across the Americas; hence, it could not have come from European settlers who arrived after Christopher Columbus. Instead, it must reflect an ancient ancestry. The Mal'ta boy's genome showed that Native Americans can trace 14% to 38% of their ancestry back to western Eurasia.

The authors suggest that after the ancestors of Native Americans split off from these of east Asians, they moved north. Somewhere in Siberia, they met another group of people coming east from western Eurasia – the people to whom the Mal'ta boy belonged. When these two groups mingled, their descendants travelled east into North America. (Yong, 2013)

Based on this study, an anthropologist and geneticist from the University of Texas at Austin, Jennifer Raff claims that they have strong evidence of Siberian ancestry for Native Americans, this study helps understand who the ancestors of those Siberians might have been. (Yong, 2013)

## Conclusion

The article doesn't necessarily assert that American Indians descend from Europeans or Eurasians; however, it appears that both Europeans and Native Americans share partially

<sup>1</sup> Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) is a molecule that encodes the genetic instructions used in the development and functioning of all known living organisms and many viruses

<sup>2</sup> The energy-processing organelles of living cells

the same ancestry.

50, 000 years ago the world was very different and people were living in specific places, which were not the same as those living there now. People migrated, conquered, mixed and got wiped out.

As these findings show, these people came from Central Asia; they spread out and conquered new lands in Europe, which were opened up after the coldest parts of the last Ice Age.

Native Americans still have genetic connections to East Asia, but the extent of their DNA shared with Eurasians was previously unknown and thought by many scientists to be the result of intermingling with Europeans after their colonization of the Americas.

The consideration that Native Americans share genes with Europeans means that both groups of current people share ancestry with a common group, however, it doesn't refer that either group is decedent from the other.

## References

Boorstin, D. J., *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*, (1948).

Retrieved May 20, 2014 from <https://archive.org/details/lostworldofthoma006951mbp>

In the Beginning, (2007). *Native Peoples of North America*.

Retrieved March 5, 2014 from <http://www.cabrillo.edu/~crsmith/origins.html>

Kaya, P. n.d. *Turkish Language and the Native Americans*.

Retrieved February 25, 2014 from <http://ireland.iol.ie/~afifi/Articles/turkic.htm>

Study: Native Americans have West Eurasian Origins, (2013).

*Aljazeera America*. Retrieved February 18, 2014 from <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/11/21/study-native-americanshavewesteurasianorigins.html>

Yong, E. (2013). *Americas' Natives Have European Roots*.

*Nature*. Retrieved February 18, 2014 from <http://www.nature.com/news/americas-natives-have-european-roots-1.14213>

Ancient Cherokee Origins, n. d., Retrieved May 20, 2014

from <http://chickamauga-chokeee.com/origins.html>