

***On the Trail of Sitting Bull:***  
**A Documentary Film on the Lakota of Today**

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When asked what they would want people in Turkey to know about the Lakota, most of the Lakota interviewed answered: “*That we are alive!*”

That indeed was the main objective of the one-part documentary film produced by the public television of Turkey, TRT. As the title of the documentary *On the Trail of Sitting Bull* suggests, the film is about the renowned Lakota leader Sitting Bull and how his descendants lived in the 21st century.

The filming locations were in North and South Dakota, covering two of the major reservations in the area, Pine Ridge and Standing Rock. The 26-day filming trip took place in July-August 2009 and 12 people were interviewed, in addition to the on-location shootings of many different places and activities.

There were five main questions that were addressed in the interviews made for the documentary: the Bering Strait Theory, Assimilation, Racism, Genocide and Hopes for the Future. These were not the only questions asked and many more issues were covered in the interviews depending on the person interviewed. Some of the topics were land claims, the Wounded Knee massacre, freedom of religion, the boarding school experience, living on the reservation, humor and contemporary art. The five topics selected for this review are considered to be the main issues concerning the past and present lives of the Lakota. They are also the issues that the Turkish audience might be most interested in, but also misinformed about.

Finally, it is important to remind the audience, or the reader in this case, that the main objective of the documentary is not to make judgements, but to hear what the Lakota think about certain issues.

### **Bering Strait Theory**

The Turkish public's knowledge of Native Americans is limited to the old Hollywood movies and comic books. Interestingly, despite the rather negative stereotypes in these "sources of information," Turkish people generally have quite a positive view of Native Americans. Today, thanks to the internet, people who are interested in the Native cultures and peoples can get more information on their history and current living conditions. Most of the time, Turks consider Native Americans as "distant relatives." Many people in Turkey believe that Turks and the native peoples of the Americas are related.

Some of the possible reasons for such feelings of kinship are the shamanic background of Turkish culture; similarities in material culture, including figures and designs on rugs; and clothes and physical appearance. Although the physical characteristics of Turks vary according to region and ethnic background, some Turks believe they look like Native Americans, with high cheek bones and similar complexions.

However, the larger public in Turkey seems not to be aware that there are many different nations of Native Americans. The Plains Indians, being the best-known Native American image of Hollywood, are the Indians that Turks identify with the most.

The first question asked to the Native people interviewed was what they thought about the Bering Strait theory. Ron His-Horse-Is-Thunder, a descendant of Sitting Bull and chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe between 2005-2009 answers:

*The whole theory about Bering Strait, is that we migrated across, I guess it is contrary to every creation story that we as Native Americans have. There is not one tribe or a nation of Indian nations that believes that they came across the Bering Strait... And so they tell us we came across the Bering Strait? Well no, we didn't. We don't believe so.*

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a writer and a poet and a member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, has similar opinions:

*It has nothing at all to do with the origin stories of the native people of this continent. So I presume it's a story made by scientists or anthropologists or some people who consider themselves scholars. It has nothing, nothing at all to say to Dakotas and Lakotas... There are lots and lots of creation stories in North America, told by indigenous people all over North America and I don't know a single one of them that suggests that we came across the Bering Strait. I find "that" kind of revealing. Wouldn't we remember that?*

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, the Standing Rock Tribal Tourism Coordinator for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe comments:

*We do know that the people in Alaska and Northern Canada and the people in Northern Siberia are the same people and they have always been, they have always had a trade network. We understand that. But we are not like them... The oldest remains we have of our people are in South America. So if our oldest people are in South America and not in the north, it just doesn't even make sense... We all believe we come from the south. Our oral stories tell us we come from the south.*

*I really have issues with the Bering Strait Theory, because it's another example of archaeological evidence that says we don't belong here, that the Americans had a right to come in and take our country because we don't belong here. We belong here. We have been made from this soil.*

Joseph McNeil Junior, also a descendant of Sitting Bull and a member of the Standing Rock Tribal Government argues:

*They say long time ago earth was pangea, all the continents were connected at one point and I believe at one point we were. And that's why you have some similarities between Central America and Egypt... If there was a split, there was a split of thought as well. And even though that may be centuries and ions ago, those relationships still exist. Trades still existed. People did a lot of things in little papyrus boats, travelled all around the world from China, from the East travelling over here to the West Coast... That occurred and there is proof of that, but is it going to be glorified and announced and advertised like a discovery from Caucasian America or European America? Those*

*things when they discover that, it is a great discovery, it is a great find but if something happens with us, that can be disputed... You know, we can tear that apart. But those things they discover about themselves are fact. Those things that are discovered about us can be speculated upon because they want to attain and maintain a proprietorship of this country.*

### **Assimilation**

Assimilation of the Native peoples of North America by the American state is one of the subjects that the Turkish public might be most misinformed about. There is a common belief that the Natives who do not live as they did in the 18th century are assimilated and have lost their identity. People expect to find what they see in movies. Seeing Native people in cars, in cities, or in western clothes make their “spectators” disappointed. Vine Deloria says in his famous book *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969: 9):

*People can tell just by looking at us what we want, what should be done to help us, how we feel and what a “real” Indian is really like. Indian life, as it relates to the real world, is a continuous attempt not to disappoint people who know us. Unfulfilled expectations cause grief and we have already had our share.*

*Because people can see right through us, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology. Experts paint us as they would like us to be. Often we paint ourselves as we wish we were or as we might have been.*

No one questions how the English language is adapted in store names or brand names in Turkey, or even in the daily language to a certain extent. Turkish people, or any other people in the world, no matter what their culture is, can listen to rap music, rock music, made use of all the opportunities of technology, can wear anything they want in their daily lives. Yet, Native Americans are often expected to continue a life style of many centuries ago. If they don't do so, they are often looked upon as “apples” - red outside, but white inside. It is extremely important for people to understand that the Native Americans living in the 21st century have a right to adapt.

The Lakota views on assimilation:

*Believe it or not people still ask; do you still live in tepees? Still, still ask this question. Do you still live in tepees? Are you related to Crazy Horse? Are you related to Sitting Bull? Are you related to so and so? You know, it's not something you would ask a black person or white person. Are you related to George Washington? You know, are you really from... Can I see your pedigree papers to prove you're white? Oh, I've got a little bit of white in me you know. No. But still those questions are asked, those things are still said.*

Joseph McNeil Junior

*Are we assimilated so much that we stopped becoming Indians? No. As long as we have the language, as long as language is intact, you still have your culture. So yes, I wear buttoned-up shirts and I wear cowboy boots and blue jeans and I drive a car. Am I assimilated? Well, I've adapted some of those, some of the things from the environment around me but have I stopped becoming Indian? No, I haven't stopped becoming Indian. Inside that's who I am.*

Ron His-Horse-Is-Thunder

*I think the government's original policy of assimilation, "to make us like them" failed in the United States. All we did was take parts of what we thought was good for us and left the rest. Back to what Sitting Bull told us what to do is, "learn all you can, take the good and leave the bad." Because assimilation is taking everything here (showing her heart) and placing it over there and trying to be something you are not.*

*Assimilation happened but it failed. So for me, we are adapting. It's a whole different concept; we are adapting to the environment around us, still being who you are, still being Lakota, still walking with pride of our people with our relatives and our ancestors right beside us, still being able to pray, still being able to go to our ceremonies, still being able to love this earth and yet still walk with our cell phones and our televisions and our computers. Because we adapt. Indian people have always been adaptable people.*

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard

*Assimilation is, as I define it, is the complete absorption of one culture by another. That's the way I define it. I don't think that has happened and I don't think it is going to happen... The fact that I don't live on the reservation, that I have an education and have taught everywhere and live in a decent house that's paid for, is I suppose, for some people, an indication that I have assimilated, that I have been absorbed by America. It's hard to say and define how it is that one lives in a broader community and yet is not a part of that community.*

*Of course America is the great assimilator. You know, it assimilates everything, everybody. That's what it does. You go to Iraq and you've got the United States writing a constitution for Iraq. That's what America does, whether they want America to do it or whether they don't.*

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

### **Racism**

Most people see racism as something of the past. That is unfortunately not the case. One of the objectives of the documentary was to show the difficulties Native people face today, especially to a Turkish audience who do not know much about the present life of the Native people.

*I think America is based on racism. I think that where we live, South Dakota, is one of the most racist states against Indians that I know of. And racism is something that is learned and it is part of history, too. When you consider that Lakotas and Dakotas and the Sioux Nation fought for forty years, fought hard wars for forty years against white people, against white invaders, it's no wonder that there is racism. And so there is a lot of just emotional racism that goes on. My problem with it is that when we define racism we very seldom say that it takes acts in order for racism to thrive. And in this town there are hate crimes, in this town it is difficult to get a job, in this town Indians are insulted on the streets everyday and that's ironic because if there is any place that we belong, it's here, here in our country.*

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

*It still occurs, yes it does. Not as blatantly as it did twenty years ago, thirty years ago, hundred years ago, no, but there are still racist attitudes in America. It depends a lot on how close you live to another group of people as to whether or not they are going to be prejudiced towards you. If they live right next to you and compete with you for the same jobs, yeah, they're going to be prejudiced. But, I as an Indian can go to, let's say some place in America where they don't have lots of Indians, let's go to, gee where would that be, let's go to Ohio where there are hardly any Indians at all and you won't experience racism like I do here in North Dakota, like I do here in South Dakota. You won't experience the level of racism because they won't see you as a threat but if there was a large population of Indians in Ohio, yeah there would be some open racism. And so today there is still open racism in this part of the country, yes.*

Ron His-Horse-Is-Thunder

*We still live on reservations with different laws and rules than other people do. We still have to tolerate and try to survive and make success out of living under a federal system of laws. We have different laws. If you as a non-Indian attack me there is a different law. If I, as an Indian attack you there is a different law. If an Indian and Indian attack each other there is a different law for that. It's all broken like this.*

*And we're going to give you laws that's going to address you so you can get some sense of justice but not the same justice that white people get. Because we are superior, we are going to have dominance over you. So if I hurt you my sentence will be greater; if you hurt me you might still be able to get out, you might still be able to make it, have success, because the government wants you to succeed. Whereas the government wants me to stay in my place or to be put away. This still exists, these laws still exist.*

*The United States is reaching out to Darfur, is reaching out to Somalia, is reaching out to Bosnia, is reaching out to many other places around the world, trying to seek a civil justice. Where is our justice here? Where are our rights to be equal here? Where are our rights to be treated by the same law, the same way here?*

*(Racism) is not something that we wish would go away, it is something that must go away.*

Joseph McNeil Junior

### **Genocide**

Another issue that was addressed in the documentary was related to the genocide of the Native peoples of the Americas. It is difficult to understand why this issue is not addressed much in the international political arena and the killing of millions of Native peoples in the Americas is considered just as history, except for some minor efforts to make it officially recognized. It is even less of an issue that the genocide of Native peoples is not just physical, but also cultural. Some of the statements in the interviews are:

*There is no interest in American historiography to talk about America's genocide of Indians, of indigenous people. America simply does not accept its role as a genocidal nation. It has been asked to do that and in fact some of the discussion that went on during the Vietnam War suggested that America might be able to see its own history in some kind of reality, but that didn't come about. So America is, as yet to say that it is a nation based in genocide. It's unfortunate that reality is, it's probably going to continue... The effort to rid America of its indigenous people is well documented. It's just not in the public arena; it's not in the schools, it's not in the public academic world.*

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

*It's never been addressed in the manner that it was addressed with Jews, the Jewish people per se, the Holocaust that occurred over there. Ours is only two hundred years ago and still exists today.*

*Everyone thinks they know everything there is about Indian people, but they don't. When every piece of land you drive on here is paid with our blood, there should be at least respect given and honour to these people, to our people all over this country, for what we were forced to do.*

*On the backs of slaves, on the backs of African American and*

*Indian people, what this country was made upon, our industrial great supremacy was based upon. We are a world power based on slavery and thievery and that needs to be recognized. This land was taken, this land was not earned. So this great American value that, "you can go out, you can do it, you can earn it," it's a fallacy! Because this land was, how did I say it, "Land of the thief, home of the slave" instead of saying "Land of the free, home of the brave." We look back at our history and we see these things. We are brave and free people, as Americans we are and I love this country. But this country must recognize its own history and make some kind of retribution for that.*

Joseph McNeil Junior

### **Hopes for the Future**

As stated in the very first paragraphs, the main objective of the documentary was to show the Turkish audience that the Native peoples of North America "are still alive." One nation, the Lakota, was chosen as a symbolic example of Native people in general and it was quite exciting to hear that our objective was the same as that of the Lakota who accepted giving us interviews. They just wanted our Turkish audience to know that the Lakota was not a nation of the past, but a living one. They were concerned, but also hopeful about the future. Their thoughts and wishes about the future are:

*Well, I wish that we could live on our land and that our young people didn't have to grow up in Denver and Los Angeles and Rapid City. And I wish that... they could be educated people and.... I wish that we could be Indians. I wish that my kids could be Lakotas and my grandchildren, too. And when you look at what goes on in the world, you recognize that, that's getting less and less and less of a possibility, you know. People of my age will talk the language but young people don't... I really think that being able to live on your land where you are and where your relatives have always lived is an important thing. But the likelihood is that my children will grow up in some city, my grandchildren will grow up in Cincinnati you know, and not know who they are. That is the fear of everybody who's my age I think, and that is the final insult of America toward us as indigenous people, you know...*

*I have nothing to complain about really as a person in this*

*world. But how the tribes are going to survive is a whole different issue. How tribal nations are going to survive the 21st century is a whole different issue. And if we think that it is clinging to casinos, we're all crazy, cause that's not it. But I do think that we have a lot of good leadership and we have a lot of good people who are working everyday to make it possible for us to survive. And... survive what? Survive America, that's what we're trying to do. Survive America.*

*There's a lot of discussion about pre-America days that we were just kind of savages in the wilderness. What I would like people to know is that, that is a vicious lie, that we were nations of people and there are still three or four hundred nations of people who live here on the land that is primordial, that there is a primordial world in the land that we possess.*

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

*I wish that each young person know who they are here. That each young person re-learn their language, that each young person know their culture, that my people continue to live, that people in this world know that we live. That is the most important thing. Because I know we are going to survive. But to survive with our culture intact, to continue to fight to keep that culture because my way of life is a good life for me and it will be a good life for my grandchildren. So, I just want to live.*

*(I want people to know) That we are alive; that we're a living people; that we continue to adapt to our worlds around us but we keep our culture, our spirituality and who we are intact. We know who we are, we know our duties to the world and I want people to know because some people actually think we're all dead. Some people think we still live in tepees, some people don't know that many of us went out and got an education and came back home to work with our people. We believe in our ways to keep the world in balance, to replenish the earth, that is the most important thing we have, to work together with our communities, aboriginal communities to try to save what we have.*

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard

To return to the main idea behind the documentary film, Ron

His-Horse-Is-Thunder summarizes the reason why *On the Trail of Sitting Bull* was made:

*If we send one message, that is: We are still alive. We still exist, we weren't wiped out. The second is, that our culture still exists, that we still have the same beliefs we did before. Our form of government may have changed but our belief system is still intact. Our language is still here. We are still a distinct group of people who has its own nation.*

The documentary *On the Trail of Sitting Bull* was first broadcasted in 2011 on TRT, the Turkish national public television network. It was screened at national and international festivals, universities and various events. It received the Royal Reed Award at the Canada International Film Festival in Vancouver, and was among the four nominees for Best Feature Documentary at the 36th American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco. It was also an official selection at the Indianer Inuit American Indian Film Festival in Stuttgart, Germany. Ron His-Horse-Is-Thunder and all the other interviewees hope their message reaches people from different nations. Native Americans of the 21st century are still alive and not frozen in time.