

Traditions & Culture



**“Without your language or your land, you are not who you say you are.”
Loretta Afraid of Bear, Oglala Lakota**

There are 573 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages in the United States, each with their own culture, language and history. Every tribe has unique traditions and distinct styles of housing, dress, and food. Federally recognized tribes vary in population and land base, but all are considered sovereign nations and hold a specific nation-to-nation relationship with the United States.

Prior to European arrival in North America, tribes had effectively governed themselves for hundreds of years and had developed thriving systems of nurturing and teaching their youth and governing their communities. The U.S. government itself finds its roots in the principles of the Iroquois Confederacy. However, European conquest shattered many Native communities through forced relocation, warfare, broken treaties and foreign-brought diseases. Most Native communities were completely wiped out.

During the 18th and 19th centuries’ “Indian Wars,” relentless aggression by the U.S. Government caused Native peoples to lose their homelands. Broken treaties and forced relocations displaced Native Americans from the land of their ancestors, where they had been living for generations, to reservations. These reservation lands offered a fraction of the size and natural resources of what was taken. Tribes were split, combined with traditional enemies and/or forced to reservations far from home and sacred spaces. Laws like 1887 Dawes Act reinforced the dependency of reservation system with land reallocation that set forth to destroy the tribe as a social unit.

Under the shamefully misguided idea of “Kill the Indian and Save the Man,” federal laws and policies prohibited tribes from practicing their religion and ceremonies, laws that were not fully

repealed until the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, later amended to protect the Native American Church's ceremonial use of peyote in 1994. Tribes lacked control of their own ceremonial items and even their human remains until the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act required federal agencies and institutions that receive federal funding to return Native American "cultural items" to their descendants and tribes.

In the Boarding School Era from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, the U.S. government enacted legislation that forcibly removed Native children from their homes and placed them in Christian boarding schools. These children were taken to hundreds of miles away from their families for years and faced severe discipline if they tried to speak their languages or practice their traditions. Many children died from malnutrition or disease. Those who survived returned years later to find themselves completely disconnected from their family and traditional ways.

The trauma and persecution endured by elder Native generations led to a breakdown of the Native family and tribal structure and a weakening of spiritual ties. Many Natives who attended boarding schools lost their sense of self through enforced shaming of their cultural identity. As a result, their children were raised with little awareness of their Native heritage and became disconnected from their tribal ways of knowing.

Today, many tribes in the United States are reviving their traditions and cultures. Central to this cultural renaissance is the importance of language and ceremony. A number of tribes have created language learning programs to preserve and pass on their tribal dialects to future generations. Ceremonies returned into practice, local radio stations began broadcasting in Native languages, pow-wows became an inter-tribal gathering space, and a new native generation is taught to live with dignity, character and pride. Running Strong supports several Native communities that are part of this movement, which brings strength and healing, and hope to today's American Indian youth.

All tribes have a rich culture, whether founded in language or ceremony, which strengthen America as a nation today. Though Native cultures have struggled to survive tribes' ever changing relationship between self-determination and self-preservation, they remain vibrant and resilient as ever.

Led by a majority Native American volunteer Board of Directors, Running Strong supports and respects all Native peoples, cultures, and traditions equally.