

Essay Title : Preserving Native Values: the Effects of Casino Income on Tribal Traditions

Preserving Native Values: the Effects of Casino Income on Tribal Traditions

Neon lights flashing across the bright red, yellow and blue marquee, the Comanche Nation casino in Lawton, Oklahoma is easy to spot. Twenty-one years after the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, designed to promote the construction of reservation casinos to encourage tribal development (100th Congress), my tribe now operates four casinos in central Oklahoma. These casinos have made significant revenue for the Comanche Nation, providing our tribe more political and economic power than ever before. These increasing revenues have been used to fund programs that benefit some tribal members, but others in the tribe remain stuck in a cycle of substandard education, drug abuse, and unemployment. The egalitarian values of the Comanche Nation, so important to our heritage, will be eroded if increasing casino revenues benefit some members and not others or cause divisions in our tribe. I investigated a sampling of other tribes who operate casinos to find out whether they have succeeded in preserving their traditional values as revenues have increased. It's vital for Comanches to understand the effects of increasing casino revenues on other tribes so that we can enact spending policies that will be fair to all members.

For some tribes, it is evident that casino revenue has opened a Pandora's Box of ills. The Redding Rancheria tribe operates the thriving Win-River casino in northern California. In the

last few years, tribal leaders brought a disenrollment case against the 75 descendants of an original member of the tribe. Disenrollment reduces the number of enrolled tribal members eligible to receive shares of casino profits. Tribes engaging in this small-minded tactic are in essence undermining the basic principles of inclusion that have helped them survive decades of tragedies such as smallpox and the Trail of Tears. Quoted in the Los Angeles Times, Carla Maslin, one of the 75 descendants, angrily exclaims that disenrollment of tribal members “is a crime...People [are] trying to take others’ heritage away” (Hiltzik 1). Taking away the collective voice that comprises customs, culture, familial ties and a common background robs an individual of his identity and destroys his link to the past and all the work by those who came before him.

For other tribes, the internal political realm has become infected with accusations of greed and corruption, creating a culture of distrust. Since the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation opened its casino in western North Carolina, its budget has soared, making at least some of its members tremendously more powerful. In 2003 the chief’s salary was \$100,000, the same as the salary of the North Carolina governor. (Jubera 2). An audit of the registration of the tribe’s members, promoted by some and strongly opposed by others, including the tribal chief, has divided the tribe. (Jubera 1). Tribal members have faced the possibility of DNA testing to prove who is really Cherokee, and therefore entitled to a share of casino profits. Some of those who have thought of themselves as Cherokee their whole lives face loss of their identity. (Jubera 3). If there is any universal truth to be derived from this factionalism, it is that more money brings more distrust.

Has casino money swallowed and digested all that was good about Native tribes? I have found that this is not entirely so. In some tribes, casino revenue has been used to revive elements of culture that were lost prior to the establishment of casinos. The Chumash tribe of southern California recently brought in experts to teach tribal members how to speak the traditional language, which was all but lost thirty years ago (Overend 1). The tribe has increased cultural programs encouraging members to learn traditional dances and traditional music (Overend 2). In this case, casino money has contributed to a renaissance in tribal traditions.

Another tribe, the Potawatomi Nation of northern Wisconsin, has had great success using casino funds to advance tribal welfare while avoiding internal corruption and member alienation. After being denied interviews with other Indian casino representatives, I was permitted to speak with the chief of the Potawatomi Nation, Eugene Shano. Operating two casinos, the tribe pays for the higher education of most of its adolescents. Similarly, the tribe has built several medical centers on its reservation, allowing all members to receive virtually cost free medical care. Thirdly, while many tribes have suffered from government corruption and obscure laws created to protect those in power, the Potawatomi Nation has in its constitution a unique system of checks and balances that clearly defines all of the restrictions placed upon its council members, and council salaries are closely regulated (Shano). Mr. Shano explained to me that the influx of casino revenue has made the tribe more business savvy, yet the tribe has managed to preserve its underlying values such as respect for elders and helping the needy. He told me that tribal children still do make bad decisions; some abuse drugs and fail to finish their education. However, he also assured me that casino revenue has provided more opportunities for whomever is willing to work hard and preserve his or her honor.

In 2008, the Comanche Nation spent over nine million dollars on community development and education (2008 Proposed Budget). Of that nine million, over two hundred thousand dollars went to nursing home improvements for tribal elders (2008 Proposed Budget). Increasing numbers of Comanches are attending college, which is most likely the best investment for any tribe to make. However, these benefits have not improved the lives of all Comanches. My cousin has had very little education beyond the grade-school level due to learning disorders. He has suffered from drug and alcohol abuse, has an infant son to provide for, and remains unemployed. For members of my tribe who cannot attend college, the future looks less promising, and the tribe may not be doing all it can with casino revenues to improve their situation.

If there is one conclusion to be made concerning whether casino revenue is beneficial to Indian tribes, it is this: those tribes which preserve their underlying morals and remember their commitment to treat all members with respect will find that the income is indeed a blessing of economic security which they have been struggling to obtain for decades. The Comanche Nation must not trade its values and traditions for increasing wealth. I will soon be eligible to vote in tribal elections, and I will share the responsibility to make sure that the Comanche tribe is doing its best to use casino revenue to benefit all of its members. I will study the positions of candidates and vote for leaders who will use casino revenue to expand the availability of education, medical care, substance abuse programs, day care and job training. A well-governed tribe can achieve prosperity while avoiding the curse of greed, preserving its heart and its

heritage.

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