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The Power of Words: The Effects of Vocabulary On Native American Communities

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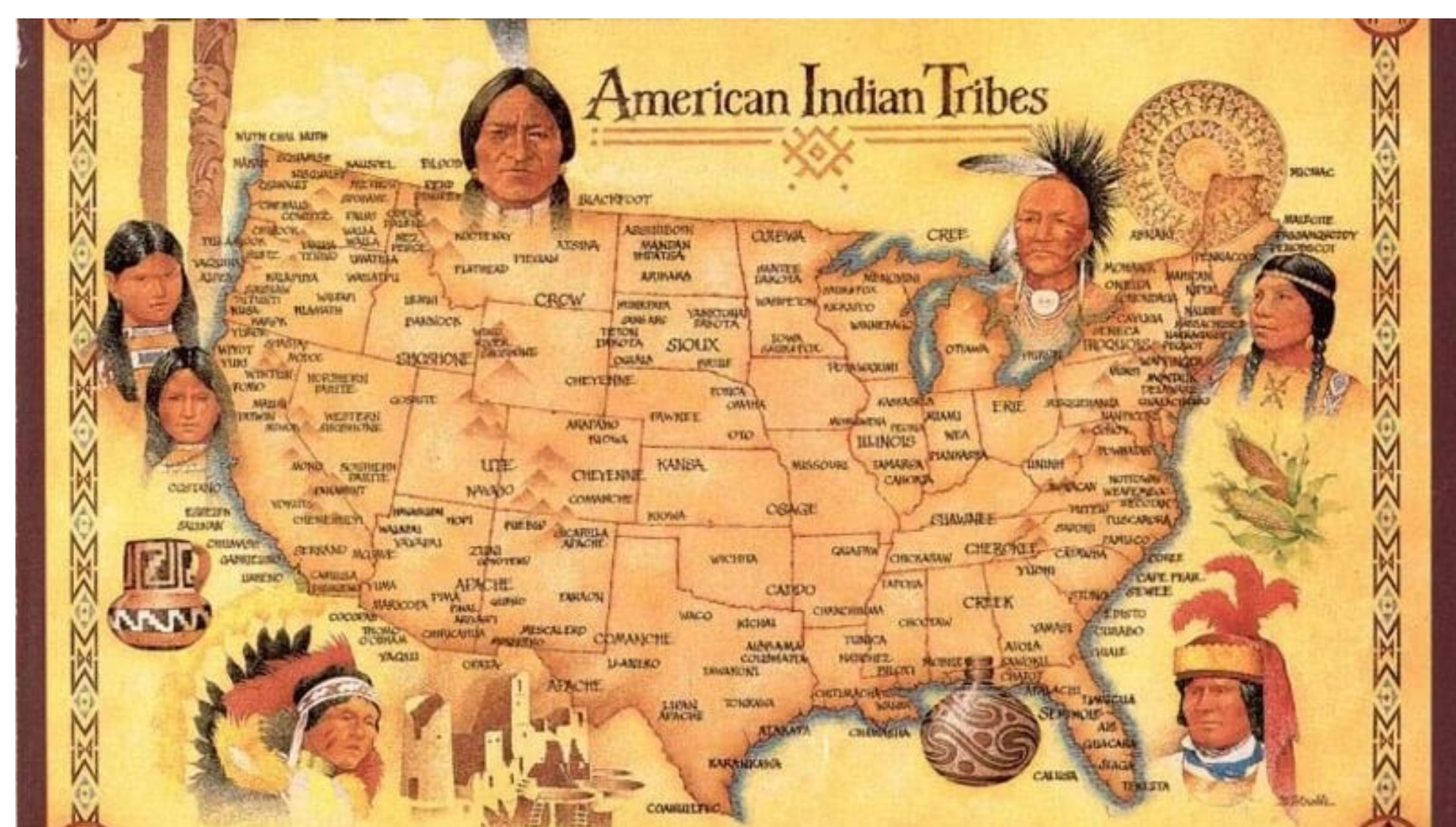
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Christopher Columbus accidentally came to America instead of the sub-continent India and proceeded to call the people he encountered “Indians”. Later, the term “American Indian” emerged and became widely used. Then, the word “Native American” was introduced in the 1960s.



Today, there are between **five hundred sixty-seven** and **five hundred seventy-three** federally recognized Native nations within the boundaries of the United States.



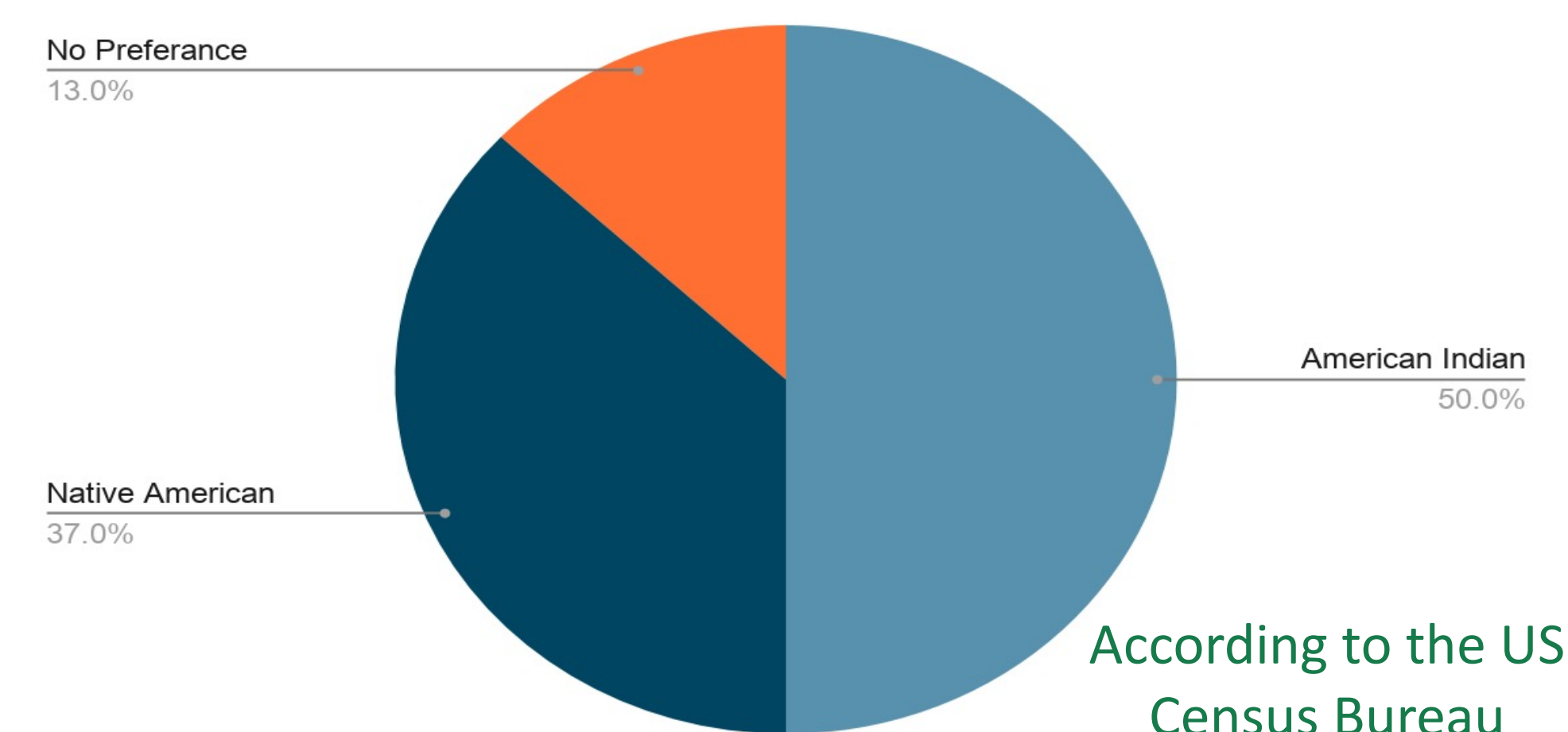
Offensive Names to Native Americans

- Redskins
- Savages
- Primitive
- Uncivilized

Problems with the word “Native American”

- “Native” has a generic meaning.
- The word “native” has a similar connotation as the word “primitive, or “backward”.
- The term Native American ignores the diversity of indigenous peoples across North America.
- “Native American” is not specific enough because every tribe and culture is different.

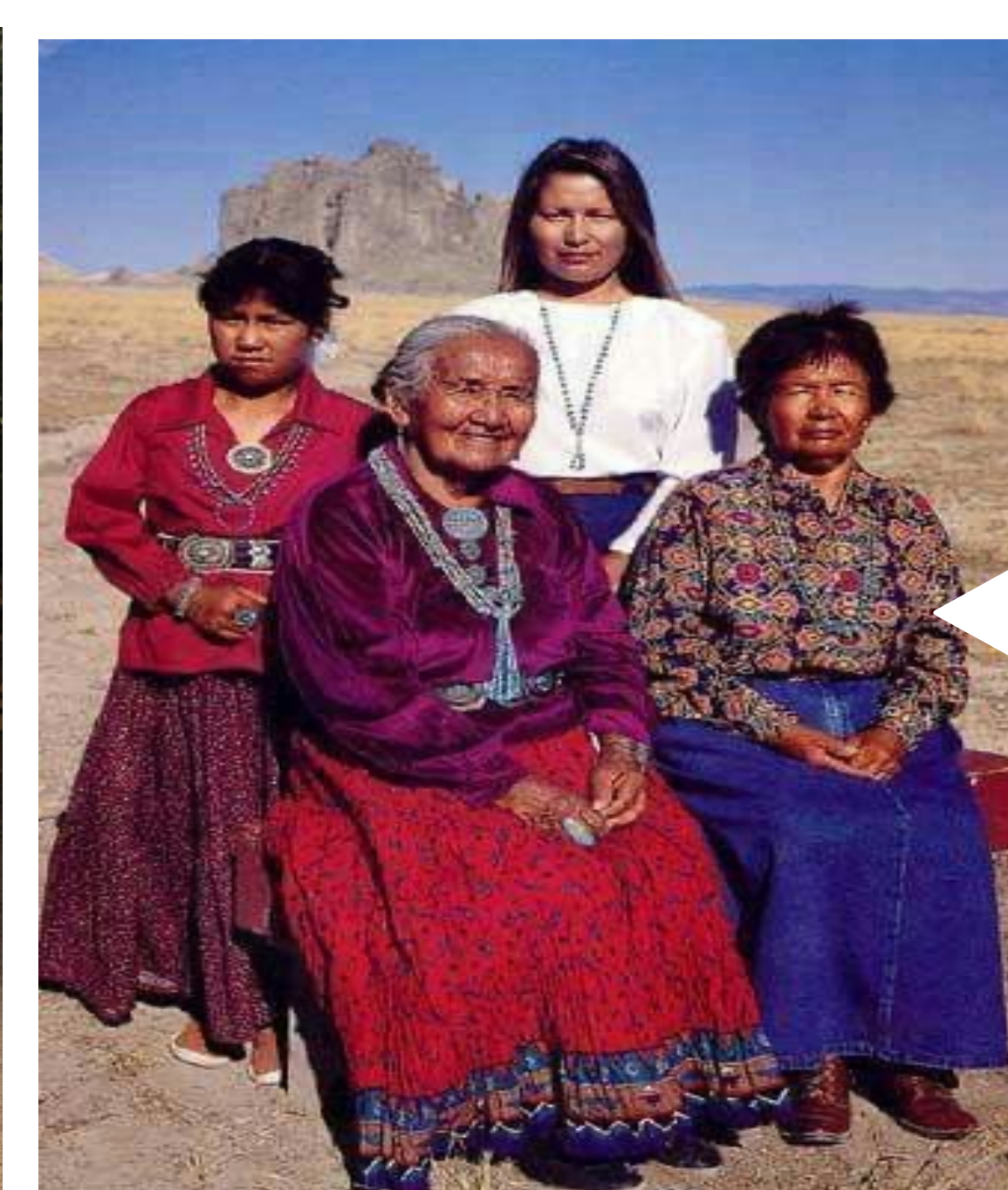
Terminology people who identified as Indigenous preferred



The Apache translation for the word “people” is “Nde” or “Ndee”.

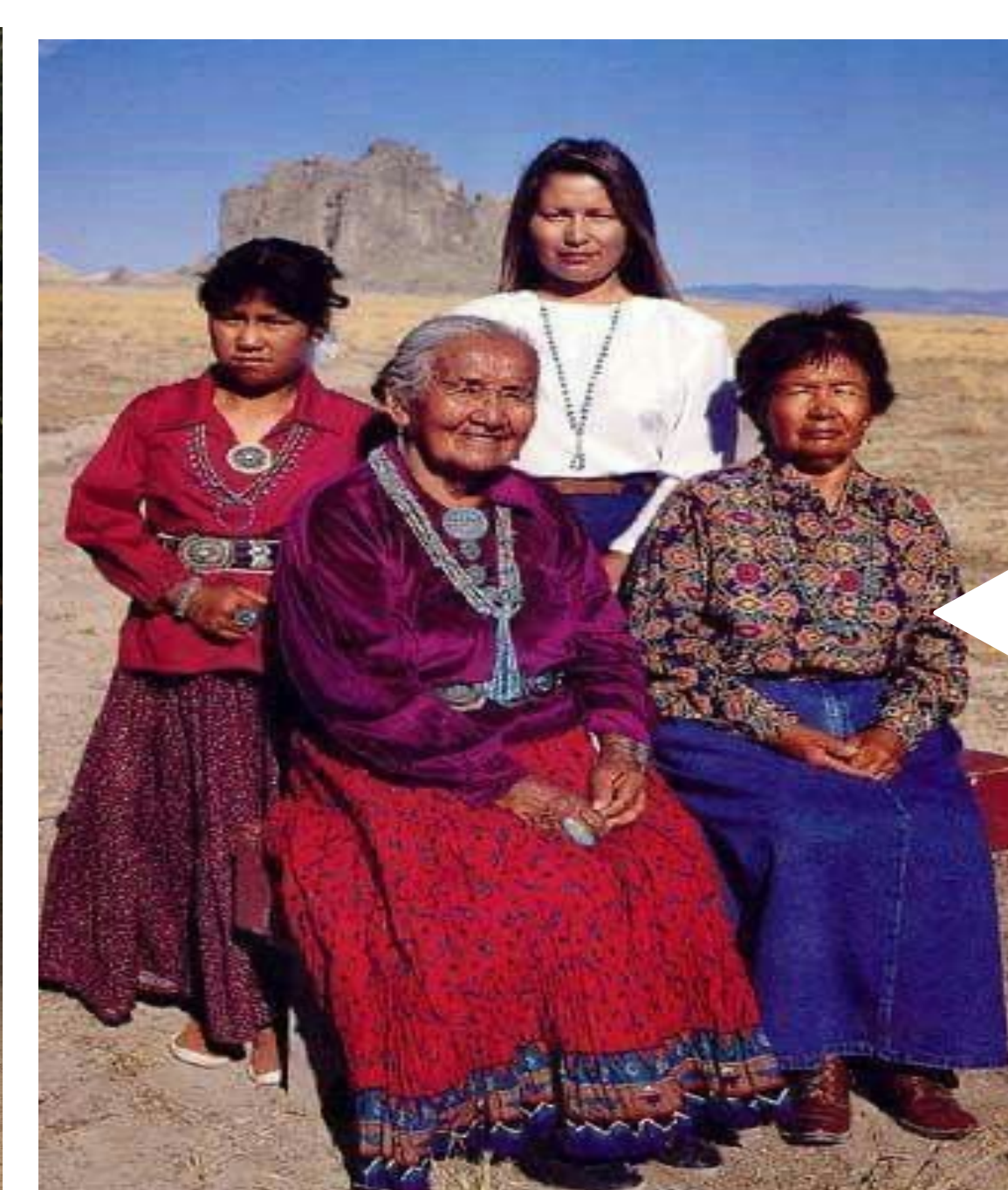


The Navajo translation for the word “people” is diné.



Best terms to use when referring to Native Americans

Many scholars insist on using the word Indigenous, with a capital I. However, most prefer to be known by their tribal affiliation. Above all, it is important to respect the terms each individual prefers because every person is different.



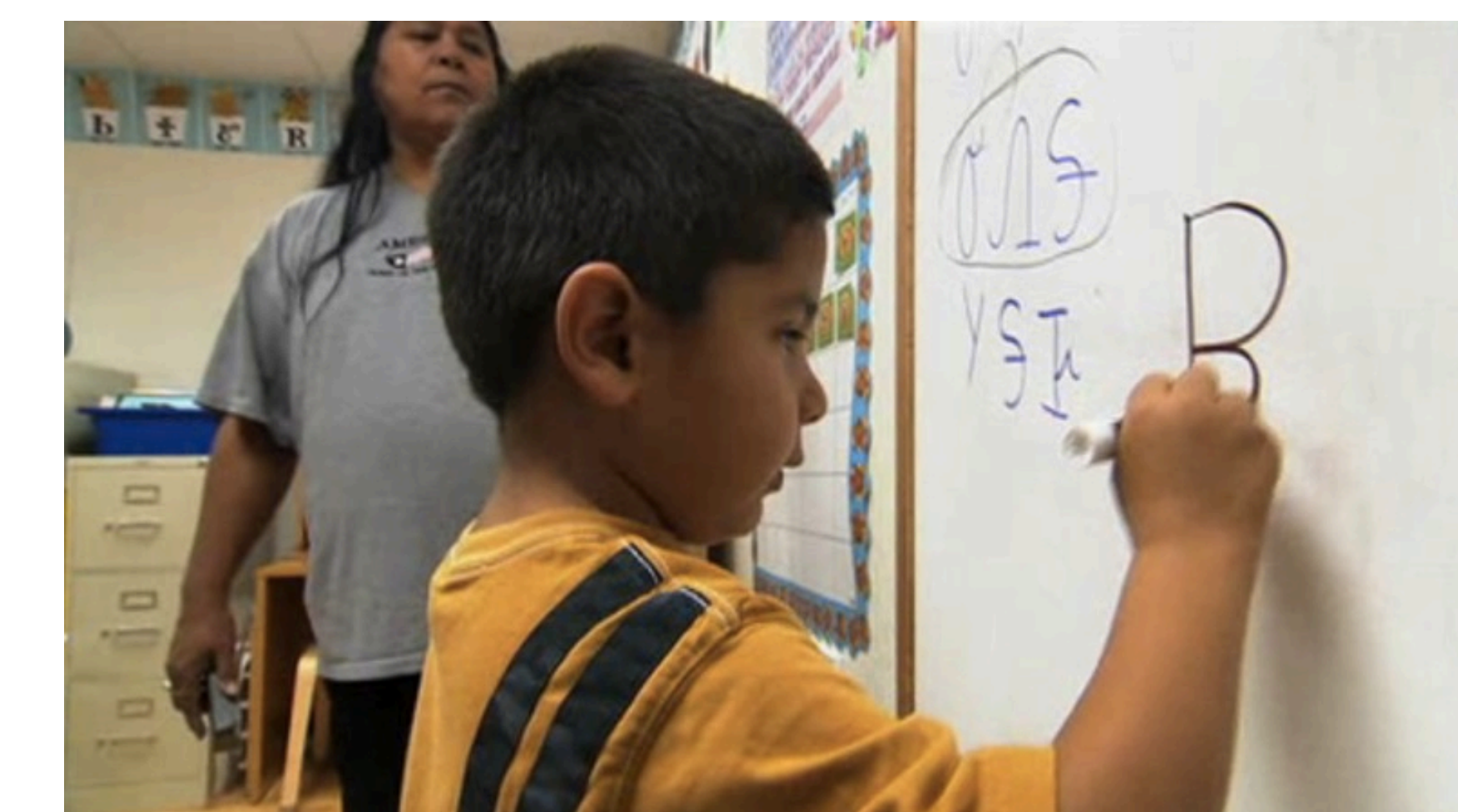
Many tribes use words that often translate to their word for “people” when referring to themselves .

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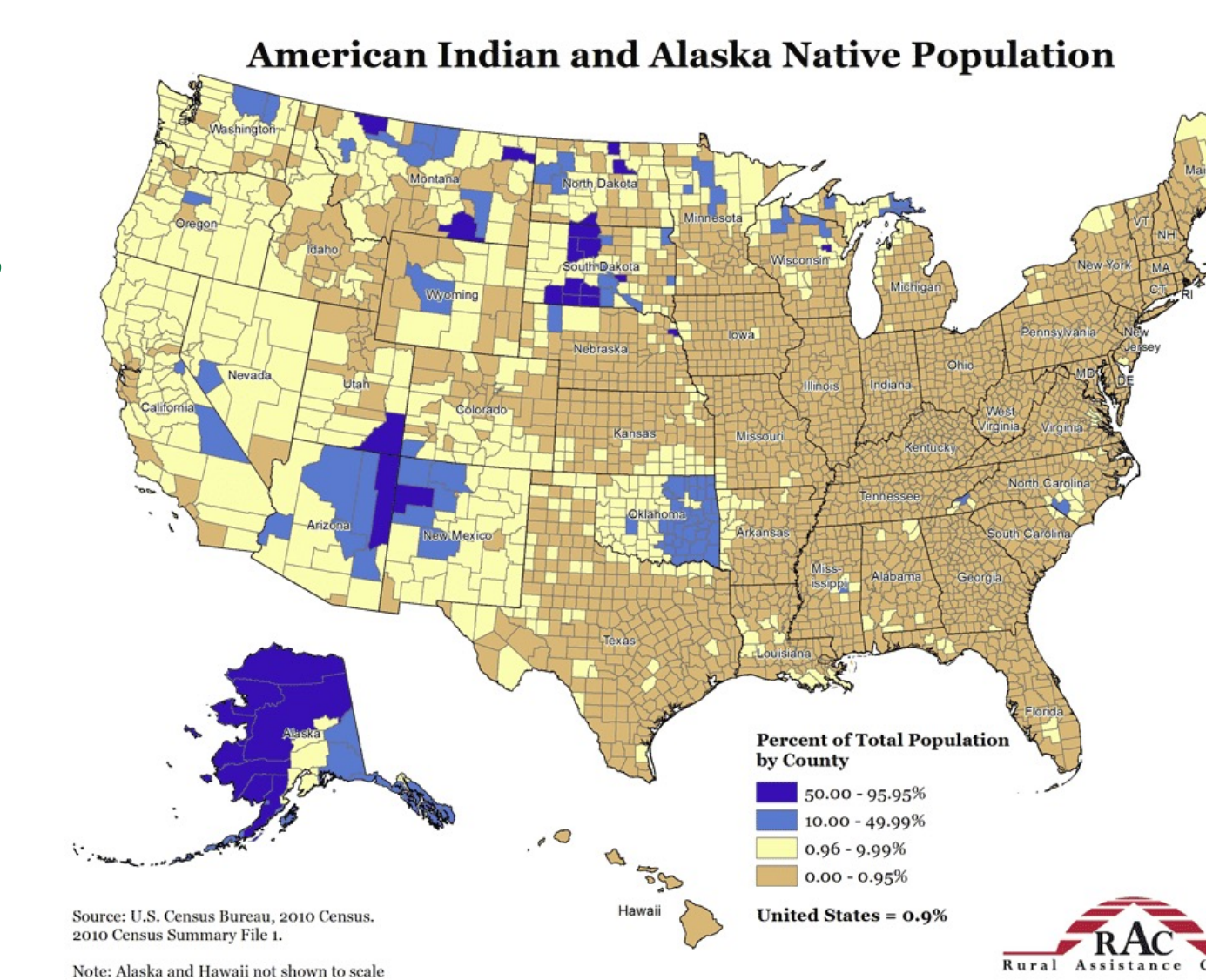
By: Nicola Calabrese

Why is Terminology Important in the Classroom?

The way educators teach their students about the past is absorbed by students and these words become part of their vocabularies. So, when students begin to use demeaning terms when referring to Native Americans, it takes a toll on Native students who share the same spaces.



A large part of the United States does not have heavy Native American populations, so most American children will only learn about Indigenous people in the classroom.



How Can Teachers Change the Narrative?

Teachers should remove offensive children’s books like *Let’s Play Indian*, by Madye Lee Chastain from their classroom libraries. Educators are encouraged to inform students that being Native American is a human identity, not an occupation like a nurse or firefighter. Therefore, it is inappropriate and offensive to take on a Native American identity as an outsider.



Educators should...

- Stop using vocabulary that harms and distorts American Indian people and their communities.
- Educate themselves to become more culturally responsive.