

# Why Call Them “Indians”?

*Safa Elhanafi*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Why do you think Native Americans are sometimes called “Indians”?

Before Europeans arrived in North America, there were millions of Indigenous people. They lived in more than 600 tribes, and they had diverse languages and cultures.<sup>1</sup> So why did people call them all “Indians”? This is a sensitive subject that raises political and cultural questions.

The whole story started when Christopher Columbus “discovered” America. He thought he

**We should call Indigenous people by the name of their tribe.**

was going to an area in Asia known as the “Indies.” When he landed in the Caribbean, he insisted he was in the Indies.

That’s why he named the people he met “Indians.”

Another Italian navigator, Amerigo Vespucci, proved that Columbus was wrong. He did not land in the Indies. That is why the Americas – the continents of North and South America – are named after Amerigo Vespucci.<sup>2</sup>

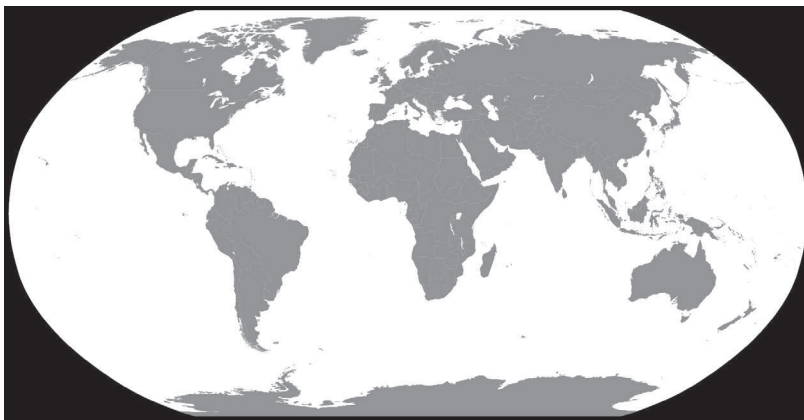
So the name “Indian” comes from one explorer who thought he was in the Indies. And the

name “America” comes from another explorer who figured out it wasn’t the Indies. If you call Indigenous people “Indians” or “Native Americans,” both names come from outsiders. This is upsetting for some people. Columbus and Vespucci are

not just outsiders, they are people who started the genocide of Indigenous people. Even the U.S. government uses the term “American Indian.” This term puts all the Indigenous people in one group and doesn’t reflect their cultures and traditions.

One of the reasons “naming” matters is that it can have the effect of collapsing all these diverse groups into one general group, which means we lose a lot of their diversity in the process.

We should call Indigenous people by the name of their tribe. We should study the Indigenous traditions and history. They are very diverse, and they are interesting and valuable for everyone. We could learn a lot from them.



Look at this map of the world. Why did Columbus think he could go west from Europe and land in the Indies?

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**Sources:** 1. <[www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/06/24/323665644/the-map-of-native-american-tribes-youve-never-seen-before](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/06/24/323665644/the-map-of-native-american-tribes-youve-never-seen-before)>  
2. <[www.britannica.com/biography/Amerigo-Vespucci](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Amerigo-Vespucci)>

**AFTER YOU READ:** According to the author, why does naming matter? What do you think about it?