Since prehistory, wars and warfare have existed among North American Indians. With the arrival of Europeans, violent conflicts surged as the Indians fought to protect territory and access to resources.

By the late eighteenth century, Native American warriors had begun to form societies around powerful symbols. Dr Max Carocci, who has studied American Indian cultures for over 30 years, explains: “The quest for power is an important aspect of Native American culture. Indigenous North American peoples realise that everyone has a certain amount of power, but by accumulating objects which carry their own inherent force, they can become more successful in life.”

Native Americans believe that objects are living things, imbued with a permeating spirit that lives in all things – skin, feathers, wood, or even stone.

The symbols around which Native American societies formed were revealed to men and women by their spirit guides, during vision quests. A group of people who had visions of the same animal might come together to form a society. Societies were often formed by groups of warriors. Each society had entry requirements – valiant deeds that warriors would be required to complete in order to enter at the lowest level of the society. They could then work their way up the echelons of power by completing brave deeds.

The societies and the symbols and objects which were associated with them became very important for the maintenance of cultural and tribal identities among Native Americans throughout their history.

With the end of the Indian wars in the late nineteenth century the societies disintegrated. The year 1890 saw the last bouts of resistance in the northern plains, culminating with the Massacre of Wounded Knee, when 700 Native American women, children and some men were killed by the US army. Warfare on the plains came to an end. Native Americans were confined to reservations, and by the beginning of the twentieth century there were only a few echoes of these brave deeds performed by old-time warriors, which were recounted orally or pictorially, by warriors now living in reservations.

During both the World Wars, older generations of Native Americans volunteered for the US army in large numbers. This was an opportunity for them to reclaim their warrior culture. Dr Carocci explains: “An underlying subtext was to reaffirm their inherent masculinity and prove themselves as valiant warriors. In the reservations they could no longer be validated by becoming warriors and society leaders.”

After World War Two, a number of tribes began to resurrect the Warrior Societies of old. Dr Carocci says: “With increasing numbers of people coming back from major wars there was a renewed sense of pride in being Indian and tribal people. What were once warriors became modern soldiers, and vice versa. Modern soldiers were nothing but a translation of what a warrior used to be. Today they are simultaneously an American and an Indian, and therefore a soldier and a warrior.”

Many contemporary Native American soldiers continue the practices of their ancestors and take war-related objects that they have received in vision quests to war. Dr Carocci adds: “The fact that Warrior Societies disappeared in the nineteenth century and weren’t revived until the mid twentieth-century doesn’t mean that the old belief systems collapsed completely. Modern soldiers continue to talk about spirit guides providing guidance when needed, and many take amulets and personal medicines (protection) into war.”

Dr Max Carocci curated a fascinating exhibition at the British Museum about the lives, objects and symbols of the Native American Indians.
Assiniboine men wearing weasel tails on their belts; studio photograph, Canada, mid-late 1800s.
© Trustees of the British Museum
Despite the fact that they are in a completely different context of modern warfare, the attitude is very much the same.”

As well as taking traditional objects into warfare, modern-day narratives have also started to appear in traditional ceremonies. Dr Carocci continues: “The revived societies are bringing back traditional practices, but in a different form. The objects and ceremonies that they employ use modern-day symbols of power and bravery on traditional regalia. For example, an old-style tepee, used in a homecoming ceremony, will now have a visual representation of helicopters and tanks, which traditionally would have been images of horse raiding or killing and scalping enemies.”

These homecoming celebrations are an incredibly important part of the new societies’ role in contemporary Native culture. They represent a counterbalancing of what soldiers may have lost in battle with what they have gained, which is pride, legitimisation of their own bravery and acknowledgement from their community of what they have contributed in defending them.

The Education Department at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, where the Warriors of the Plains exhibition was displayed from September 2012 to January 2013, organised a series of meetings with UK veterans of recent wars. Dr Carocci says: “It was interesting to see how veterans from the UK have responded to hearing about the Native American experiences. They identified a contrast between their own homecoming, where they may have had support from family and close friends, but no validation from the larger community. This exhibition has highlighted differences between the post-conflict processes and ways of dealing with war and homecoming.

“I did not just want to offer a snapshot in time, and for precisely this reason we included contemporary objects in the exhibition, so people could see that Native American cultures are still very much alive and part of contemporary life.”

Dr Max Carocci is Programme Director of Birkbeck’s Certificate in World Arts and Artefacts, and teaches the core course, Indigenous Arts of the Americas. His book, Warriors of the Plains, was published in 2012 by McGill-Queen’s University Press. The Warriors of the Plains exhibition will be on display at Manchester Museum from May until mid-November 2013.

By Bryony Merritt