Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand talks about some cultural similarities and differences among the nearly 600 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States.

It's not really just one culture. There's actually 573 federally recognized tribes now. And that's not including the terminated tribes, or the tribes who self-identify or state-identify. And all of those tribes have similarities. They're all, you know, we all have things that are similar, like belief in feathers and stuff like that. But all of them are different. The thing with native tribes is they're all each sovereign nations. So a lot of the bigger tribes, like Lakota and Diné and everything like that, they actually have their own reservation [which] is essentially like their own country.

And so there's languages; there's cultural customs; there's things that are like I have an owl behind me, and I like owls. But technically in my culture they're a symbol of death or change. And my dad has always spun it as change. So that's why I like them because they're kind of, that bringer of something is gonna be a big change in your life. So when they say when you dream of an owl, it's not necessarily that somebody is going to die. You're dreaming that some part of your life is going to die and you're going to start anew. So I've always liked the owl, but I have a couple of Navajo or Diné friends who are very immersed in their culture and owls are very bad. And so there's [been] a couple of times where they will be like, ah, OK, you can't have a blanket with an owl on it. Like that's just, you can't do that.

And they're the same with snakes. We like snakes but they're like, nope, snakes are bad. So there's little things like that.

[For] another friend of mine, otters are actually really bad in their culture. I did not know that. I had an outfit that had an otter on the back of it, and she couldn't give me a hug because she couldn't touch the otter. And she couldn't even look at it. So it's kind of funny.

But that's the main thing I would say. A lot of the tribes are different. So powwows and like, you know, a lot of that stuff is all similar language. Everybody kind of knows powwow dancing. They know all the different styles and the arts are similar. Some of the beliefs are very similar, but like I mentioned, some of them are very different.

And then also a big part of that is with the whole mascots and with head dresses and stuff like that. Some tribes might not have a problem with it because it's not their thing actually. Because a lot of the Pueblo tribes don't do head dresses and some of them don't do teepees. When I was at Indian education, we used to have a saying, "Do all Indians live in teepees?" And we'd ask all the kids that. When I first started, all the kids would raise their hand "Yes." And then we'd have to explain, "No, that's a romanticized archaic thing. There are still teepees at powwows and people still use them for ceremonial purposes, but nobody's really living in them as much anymore. And then we mentioned all the other tribes and everything in reservations and stuff.

So main thing I would say is that there's similarities but it's very different. And each tribe kind of has their own personality and their own culture. For Lakota, we are actually the headdress tribe. And for a lot of Lakota people, everybody kind of follows the buffalo. So buffalo are sacred to most tribes. For the Lakota people, they're family. They're essentially the providers and everything. They're very sacred.

And we also have a really big relationship with the stars. Lakota people and tribes people, anybody who was on the plains, plains tribes, they have a really big relationship with stars. We say we come from the stars. When you look at Lakota families and stuff, a lot of our ceremonies have star quilts. When you are graduating, when you're getting married, things like that, you get a star quilt as a gift from your family. And then when you pass away, a lot of the times they string up the star quilts. And that's actually one of the things I was loved about Lakota funerals is it almost looks like the person's sleeping in the stars because they're laid out there for the wake and you mourn with them for three days. And while you're there, there's all these star quilts that are everywhere. So it looks like they're surrounded by stars.