
America's First Peoples

Unit 2 Readings

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Before Europeans

Before the arrival of Europeans in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the American continents were home to a diverse array of Native American cultures. These indigenous peoples thrived for thousands of years, developing complex societies, rich traditions, and a deep connection to the land. In this unit, we will explore the various aspects of Native American cultures before European contact, highlighting their diversity, social structures, and spiritual beliefs.

Arthur Big Mountain of the Oneida Nation, 9, waits for the Grand Entry ceremony of the 69th annual Chicago Powwow at Schiller Woods Oct. 8, 2022, in Chicago.



Diversity among Native Cultures

Native American cultures were incredibly diverse, with hundreds of distinct tribes and nations occupying the vast expanse of the American continents. Each group developed its own unique culture, adapting to their specific environments and resources. From the Iroquois Confederacy in the Northeast woodlands to the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest and the nomadic Plains tribes, Native American societies were as varied as the landscapes they inhabited.



This map shows some of the many native American groups living in America at the time of European contact. At the time Europeans arrived in the Americas, there were an estimated 500 to 600 distinct Native American tribes speaking over 300 different languages. However, it is essential to note that the number of tribes is not exact, as indigenous populations were fluid, and tribal affiliations could change over time.

The Iroquois Confederacy

The Iroquois Confederacy, also known as the Haudenosaunee or the League of Five Nations (later Six Nations), was a political alliance among the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora tribes in present-day New York and parts of Canada. Central to the Iroquois social structure was matrilineal kinship, in which clan membership and inheritance were passed down through the mother's line. Clans were led by clan mothers, who held significant authority and were responsible for choosing male chiefs, known as sachems, to represent their clan in the Grand Council.

The Grand Council was the governing body of the Iroquois Confederacy, and it brought together the chosen sachems to make decisions on behalf of the entire league.

Decisions were made through consensus, fostering a sense of unity and cooperation among the member tribes. The Iroquois social structure emphasized the importance of community, shared responsibilities, and the equal distribution of power, which contributed to the stability and strength of the Confederacy for centuries.



Mohawk Warrior. Painting by David Wright.

The Pueblo Peoples

The Pueblo peoples, native to the southwestern United States, were known for their unique social structures and communal way of life. Pueblo societies were primarily organized around extended family units, called clans, which traced their lineage through the maternal line. Each clan was responsible for specific roles and duties within the community, such as farming, pottery, or weaving. The Pueblo peoples lived in distinctive, multi-storied adobe structures called "pueblos," which housed several families and facilitated close-knit community living. Pueblo societies were often governed by a council of elders, who made decisions collaboratively and ensured the entire community's well-being.

Spiritual life was central to Pueblo culture, with religious ceremonies and rituals deeply intertwined with daily life. Kivas, ceremonial underground chambers, served as spiritual and social gathering spaces for Pueblo communities. The Pueblo peoples' social structures were characterized by cooperation, shared responsibilities, and a strong sense of community, which allowed them to thrive in the challenging desert environment.



Kiva Courtyard at Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado. Kivas served multiple functions, with their rooftops acting as central courtyards for everyday activities. Women could be seen grinding corn or preparing meals, while men crafted tools or weaved fabric. The small doors surrounding the courtyard might have been designed to retain warmth in the rooms, particularly during cold winter nights. The entrance to the kiva requires climbing down a ladder into the ground, which could symbolize the Ancestral Pueblo peoples' belief in their origins. Additionally, this design might have facilitated the purification of individuals through ritual smoke as they entered the kiva.

The Plains Tribes

The nomadic Plains tribes, such as the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Comanche, inhabited the vast grasslands of North America and developed unique social structures that were well-adapted to their mobile way of life. These tribes were organized around bands: small, flexible family units that allowed easier movement across the expansive plains. Within each band, decision-making was generally decentralized, with elders, warriors, and respected members of the community contributing to group decisions. Chiefs often served as leaders, but their authority was largely based on their ability to build consensus and maintain the welfare of their people.

The Plains tribes were renowned for their warrior societies, which played a vital role in hunting, defense, and maintaining social order. A strong emphasis was placed on the values of courage, generosity, and honor, which were essential for survival and social cohesion in the

harsh, nomadic lifestyle. The social structures of the nomadic Plains tribes fostered adaptability, cooperation, and resilience, enabling them to thrive in the challenging environments of the Great Plains.



Buffalo Hunt, Chase. painting by George Catlin, 1844.

Social Structures and Trade

Social structures among Native American tribes varied, with some groups organizing themselves into hierarchical systems with chiefs and councils, while others lived in more egalitarian societies. In many cases, tribes formed complex networks of trade and alliances, exchanging goods, resources, and knowledge with neighboring groups. For example, the Mississippian culture, centered around Cahokia, was a sophisticated society with a vast trade network that spanned across the continent.

Mississippian Trade Networks

The Mississippian trade network was a vast and sophisticated system of exchange that connected numerous Native American cultures across the North American continent during

the Mississippian period, roughly between AD 800 and 1600. Centered around the city of Cahokia, which was one of the largest and most influential urban centers in pre-Columbian North America, the trade network facilitated the exchange of a wide range of goods, such as copper from the Great Lakes region, marine shells from the Gulf Coast, mica from the Appalachian Mountains, and obsidian from the Rocky Mountains. These materials were used to create ornate artifacts, tools, and ceremonial items, reflecting their owners' wealth and social status.

The Mississippian trade network also facilitated the dissemination of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices, enabling the spread of agriculture, pottery, and mound-building traditions throughout the region. This extensive trade network highlights the complexity and interconnectedness of the various Mississippian cultures, demonstrating their advanced economic, social, and political systems.



Cahokia as it may have appeared c. 1150 CE; painting by Michael Hampshire.

Cahokia's Mysterious Disappearance

The mysterious dissolution of Cahokia, once the largest and most influential urban center in pre-Columbian North America, has long been a subject of fascination and debate among scholars and archaeologists. At its peak around AD 1050-1200, Cahokia was home to thousands of inhabitants and was a central hub for trade, religion, and politics. However, by the beginning of the 14th century, Cahokia experienced a rapid decline, and the city was eventually abandoned.

The exact reasons for Cahokia's collapse remain unclear, with several theories proposed by researchers. Some suggest that resource depletion, overpopulation, and environmental degradation led to its decline, while others point to the possibility of social unrest, conflict, or



Monks Mound, the largest man-made earthen structure in North America, is part of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, near Cahokia and Collinsville, Illinois, U.S. Monks Mound is 30 metres high.

political instability. Climatic changes, such as prolonged droughts or flooding, could have also played a role in the city's downfall by disrupting agricultural productivity and trade. Despite ongoing research and archaeological investigations, the mystery of Cahokia's dissolution continues to captivate the imagination and elude definitive answers.

Agriculture and Resource Management

Contrary to the stereotype of Native Americans as solely hunter-gatherers, many tribes practiced advanced agriculture techniques, cultivating crops such as corn, beans, and squash. The "Three Sisters" agricultural method, for instance, involved planting these crops together to maximize soil nutrients and yield. Native American peoples also demonstrated a deep understanding of their environments, skillfully managing resources like water, forests, and wildlife to sustain their communities.

Sustainable Fisheries Management of the Northwest Tribes

The tribes of the Pacific Northwest, such as the Haida, Tlingit, and Chinook, relied heavily on the abundant salmon populations in the region for their subsistence and cultural traditions. Recognizing the importance of maintaining healthy salmon stocks for their survival, these tribes developed sophisticated and sustainable methods of fishery management.

One key practice involved the use of fish weirs, which were structures built in rivers to guide the salmon into traps or nets. These weirs were designed to allow some salmon to pass through, ensuring that enough fish could continue upstream to spawn and replenish the

population. Additionally, tribal fishers selectively harvested salmon based on their species and size, allowing younger fish to grow and reproduce before being caught.

The Pacific Northwest tribes also had strict customs and taboos surrounding the harvesting and consumption of salmon. They believed in treating the fish with respect, returning the bones to the water after consumption to ensure the fish's spirit would be



Salmon fishing with large loop nets by Native Americans. Tribal tradition determines the spot each tribal member fishes from. Celilo Falls, Oregon.

reborn. Ceremonies like the First Salmon Ceremony were held to honor and give thanks for the return of the salmon each year, reinforcing the importance of maintaining a respectful and sustainable relationship with the fish and the natural world.

Through these carefully managed practices and cultural traditions, the tribes of the Pacific Northwest were able to harvest salmon sustainably for generations, maintaining the delicate balance between their communities and the ecosystems they depended on.

The Plains Tribes Respectful Use of the Buffalo

The tribes of the American Plains, such as the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Comanche, relied heavily on the buffalo (or bison) for their sustenance, clothing, shelter, and tools. Recognizing the importance of these animals for their survival, these tribes practiced a holistic approach to utilizing buffalo, ensuring that no part of the animal was wasted.

Once a buffalo was killed, the tribe members would meticulously process the carcass. The meat was consumed as a primary food source, and any leftovers were dried and preserved as pemmican, a mixture of dried meat, fat, and berries, which served as a highly nutritious, long-lasting food staple.

A hundred uses? How the Plains Indians used every part of the buffalo.

Horns were used for arrow-straighteners, cups, fire-carriers, head-dress ornaments, ladles, spoons, toys and quill-flatteners.

The **skull** was used in religious ceremonies. The **brain** was used for tanning the hides.

Rawhide was used for bags, belts, containers, horse harnesses, lashings, masks, sheaths, shields, snow-shoes, string and travois lashings.

Tanned hide was used for bags, bedding, blankets, clothes, dolls, dresses, drums, leggings, mittens, moccasins, pouches, robes, saddle and *tipi* covers.

The **flesh** was cooked, or dried and mixed with fat and wild cherries to preserve it as pemmican.

Sinews were used for bowstrings and thread.

The **tongue** was used as a hairbrush and also eaten raw as a delicacy.

The **heart** was cut from the body and left on the ground to give new life to the herd. The buffalo was sacred, man's relative who gave his life so that the people could live. The heart might also be eaten raw so that the warrior could take the strength and power of the buffalo.

Fat was used for cooking, to make soap and as hair grease

Gall was used to make yellow paint. The **liver** was eaten raw as a delicacy.

Intestines were used for buckets and cooking vessels.

Fur was used for decoration on clothes, as stuffing for saddles and pillows, and to make mittens and rope.

The **tail** was used for fly swats, ornaments and whips.

The **bladder** was used for food bags.

Dung was used for fuel (buffalo chips) and smoked by men in special ceremonies.

Bones were used for arrowheads, dice, game counters, jewellery, knives, needles, paint brushes, saddle frames, shovels, sledge runners, tools and war clubs.

Hooves were used to make glue and also to make rattles and tools.



The buffalo's hide was used to create clothing, such as robes, moccasins, and leggings, as well as for constructing tipis, the portable, conical tents that enabled the nomadic lifestyle of the Plains tribes. The bones were fashioned into tools and weapons, including knives, scrapers, arrowheads, and even sleds for transporting goods. Sinew, or animal tendon, was used as a strong thread for sewing and for bowstrings, while the buffalo's hooves were boiled to create glue.

Even the less obvious parts of the buffalo were utilized. The bladder and stomach were cleaned and used as containers for water or food storage, and the horns were carved into spoons, cups, or ornamental items. The fat was used for cooking and making soap, and the dung, known as buffalo chips, served as a valuable fuel source for fires on the treeless plains.

By carefully using every part of the buffalo, the Plains tribes demonstrated a deep respect for the animal and the environment, ensuring that they could continue to rely on the buffalo for generations while maintaining a sustainable and harmonious relationship with the natural world.

Spiritual Beliefs and Customs

Spirituality played a central role in Native American cultures, with most tribes holding a strong belief in the interconnectedness of all living things and the natural world. Animism, the belief that objects, places, and creatures possess distinct spiritual qualities, was a common theme among various tribes. Rituals, ceremonies, and rites of passage were integral components of daily life, fostering a sense of unity and identity within communities.

Animism

Animism, the belief that objects, places, and creatures possess distinct spiritual qualities, has played a significant role in shaping various aspects of Native American cultures.

Animistic beliefs often lead to the designation of specific places or objects as sacred, as they are believed to possess spiritual significance or power. Examples include the Black Hills,

considered sacred by the Lakota Sioux due to their belief that spirits inhabit the area, and the Medicine Wheel, a stone structure used by various Plains tribes for ceremonies and astronomical observations.

Totem poles (like the one on the left), carved by the tribes of the Pacific Northwest, represent animals, spirits, and ancestors, symbolizing the stories and beliefs of the community.

Animism fosters a deep connection with and respect for the natural world, as it is believed to be inhabited by spirits. Native American cultures often develop sustainable practices and conservation efforts based on this worldview. As we have seen, the Plains tribes utilized every part of the buffalo they hunted, ensuring nothing was wasted and demonstrating their respect for the animal's spirit. Animism is also seen in the way the tribes of the Pacific



"THUNDER BIRD"
AS A MAN

"SKANA"
THE KILLER-WHALE

"CHET-WOOT"
THE BEAR
Spitting up the Wolf Man

FROG

"SE-SOOK"

TWO-HEADED SERPENT

"OL-HIYO"
THE SEAL

"WALALEE"
THE SALMON

"LE-LOO"
THE WOLF

THE RAVEN

FROG

THE ANCIENT
POWERFUL SUPERNATURAL

"KUUMA"
THE BULLHEAD

"EL-KOLIE"
THE WHALE

Northwest managed salmon populations carefully, employing techniques that allowed for the conservation and replenishment of stocks, reflecting their belief in the spiritual significance of the salmon and its ecosystem.

Rituals, Ceremonies, and Rites of Passage

Native American cultures have developed a variety of rituals and ceremonies rooted in animistic beliefs. For instance, the Potlatch ceremony of the Pacific Northwest tribes, such as the Haida and Tlingit, involves the giving of gifts and feasting to celebrate the spirits and maintain balance in the community. The Pueblo peoples in the Southwest practice the Kachina dances, which involve elaborate masked performances to honor the Kachina spirits that govern rain, agriculture, and other aspects of life.

Native American rites of passage vary across different tribes, but they all serve to mark significant transitions in an individual's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, or death. One notable example is the puberty rite, which often involves a period of isolation, fasting, and



Kaila Perry and Meleah Amos dancing in a Sunrise Ceremony at Fort Apache Reservation. Photo by Patrick Breen.

rituals to guide adolescents into adulthood. For instance, in many Plains tribes, young men would undertake a vision quest, seeking spiritual guidance and a personal guardian spirit through solitary fasting and meditation in the wilderness.

Among the Apache, young women participated in the Sunrise Ceremony, an elaborate four-day ritual that celebrated their transition to womanhood and involved dancing, singing, and symbolic acts of purification and renewal.

These rites of passage are deeply embedded in Native American cultural and spiritual beliefs, reinforcing the individual's connection to their community, ancestors, and the natural world, while providing guidance and support during key life transitions.

Conclusion

The Native American cultures that thrived before European contact were rich, diverse, and deeply connected to the land. Despite the varied social structures, agricultural practices, and spiritual beliefs that characterized these societies, they all shared a profound respect for the environment and a desire to live in harmony with it. As we strive to learn from the past, it is essential to acknowledge and appreciate the complexity and wisdom of the indigenous peoples who inhabited the Americas long before the arrival of European explorers.