

HTY/SSC 110HM Module 1 Lecture Notes

Pre-contact Native Americans

Terms: Before we begin to learn about Native American history and life, it is important that you become familiar with some of the terms that we will be using throughout this course:

The term **“aboriginal peoples”** refers to the original inhabitants of an area.

In this course, we will use the term **“Native American”** to refer to the aboriginal peoples of North America.

The term **“Indian”** and **“American Indian”** are the terms most often used to refer to Native Americans in many of the historical documents you will read throughout this course.

The term **“pre-contact”** refers to life in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans. We will discuss pre-contact tribes, pre-contact practices, pre-contact trade-routes, and pre-contact inter-tribal relations.

The term **“inter-tribal”** refers to relations and interactions between different tribes.

The term **“intra-tribal”** refers to relations and interactions within a tribe.

And the term **“culture”** refers to the practices and beliefs that define a particular group of people including their religion, the foods they eat, the clothes they wear, the language they speak, the music and dances they create, and their traditions and customs.

Native American Diversity: When we talk about Native Americans and Native American history and culture, it is important to remember that Native Americans are a very diverse group of people. They lived all over North and South America and many tribes from different regions had very little in common.

In fact, there were over 2,000 languages spoken by the millions of Native peoples that inhabited North America prior to European arrival.

In addition to speaking different languages, these Native groups had different spiritual beliefs, lived in different types of dwellings, had different methods of acquiring food and waging war, and had different cultural practices. Tribal groups that lived in different areas of North America had no more in common than did the different groups of Europeans – French, Italians, Germans, and British – who spoke different languages and had been fighting each other for a thousand years.

Native American groups were people, just like we are today, and they had disputes with neighboring tribes over land and they formed alliances with other tribes to facilitate trade, to ensure stability, and to ensure that they would have allies in battle. Native Americans were not one big happy family, but although they had their differences, there existed a balance between warfare, trade, and other inter-tribal dealings that ensured tribes could sustain themselves.

Native American World View: Though tribes from different areas were very diverse, there were some broad similarities shared by most Native Americans, especially in regard to Native world view. As we already discussed at the beginning of this module, world view refers to what you believe about how the world works and your place in it.

Native Americans lived in harmony with the natural world. Native Americans believed that people are at one with the universe. The destinies of man and animals are linked and that both man and animals were spiritual beings occupying a spiritual world. They had a **sympiotic** relationship and had to adhere to a code of behavior in relating to each other in order to maintain a balance in the universe.



Fowler, John. *Bird Deer*. 2010. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. 25 April 2013.

This code said that 1) a hunter must never kill more animals than he needed, 2) hunters must treat the animal's body with respect, and 3) animals must not resist capture, but surrender themselves to the needy hunter.

Spiritual Nature of the Hunt: The first scene of the film *Last of the Mohicans* illustrates perfectly the symbiotic relationship between Native Americans and all living things and the spiritual nature of the hunt. As music plays, a deer breaks through dense forest foliage, desperately trying to evade the three warriors who run through the woods in hot pursuit, brandishing both a rifle and bows and arrows. Suddenly, a rifle shot pierces the air; the deer continues to run, but then falters and crashes to the ground. As the warriors approach the fallen animal, one begins a soft prayer in the Mohican language. Translated, the prayer is... "We're sorry to kill you brother. We do honor to your courage and speed, your strength."

This simple scene lasts for only a few short moments, but its message is very powerful. The fact that the filmmakers chose to open the film with this sequence sets the tone for the entire film by placing spirituality and the symbiosis between Native Americans and nature at the center of the story. This scene reinforces the fact that for Native Americans, hunting was a spiritual occupation and the killing was preordained and blessed by the spirits.

European World View: In sharp contrast, the Europeans' view of the relationship between man, the earth, and the creatures that inhabited the earth was based on the Judeo-Christian tradition as outlined in the Holy Bible.

According to the Book of Genesis, Chapter 1 verse 28, “God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue* it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds in the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Rather than the symbiosis that characterized Native Americans’ relationship with the earth and its creatures, Europeans adhered to the belief that they were to control the earth and rule over all living things. And, due to the developments related to the Scientific Revolution and the Renaissance, Europeans began to believe that they had the ability to begin to understand nature and, therefore, to control what had before been a mystery. This represented only the beginning of the differences between the way that Native Americans viewed the world and the way Europeans viewed the world.

- Man controls the Earth
- Man rules over the Earth and all creatures
- Much different than the symbiosis that characterized Native Americans’ relationship with the natural world

The Sacred and the Secular: Another important difference between the way Native Americans and Europeans viewed the world was their perceptions of the **sacred** versus the **secular**. That which is secular is of this world and not spiritual or religious. That which is sacred is holy and related to religion or spirituality.

For Europeans, the sacred and the secular were distinct with no relation between the two. There were two levels of life: the natural or real world and the spiritual which was not real but abstract. The spiritual and the natural were not intertwined, but separate.

This was not how Native Americans saw the world. For them, there was no separation between the spiritual or sacred and the natural or secular worlds or planes of existence. The natural world was no more real than the spiritual world. In fact, the spiritual world was most often viewed as more important than the natural world. All living and inanimate things were possessed with their own spiritual powers and linked together to form a sacred whole.

The Land: In keeping with this view, Native Americans had a sacred relationship with the land. They did not see it as something to be owned by any one person or to be bought and sold as a commodity. The land, the earth had a spirit, demanded respect, and was no less an intrinsic part of the universe than were people. To exploit the land or treat it with disrespect would be to cut oneself off from the spiritual power in all things. If one offended the land by fishing or hunting more than was needed, this would not be in line with the established mutual trust between all things, and the earth would retaliate by making animals and fish scarce and causing starvation.

This existed in sharp contrast to European beliefs concerning the land (Europeans believed land was to be owned) and would become the main source of friction between these two very distinct peoples.

Difference in World Views: We discussed some other differences between the Native American and the European world views at the beginning of this module.

To review, most Native Americans were **animistic**, meaning they believed that all things in nature, including rocks, trees, animals, the sky, and the earth, had spirits just the same as humans. This contrasts with Europeans who were **monotheistic**, meaning they believed in only one God.

Native Americans were also **matrilineal**, meaning they traced the lineage of their children through the mother rather than through the father. One of the reasons this was important is because it ascribed a certain status to women in society not present within European society during the time period with which this course is concerned. Europeans were mostly **patrilineal**, meaning they traced their lineage through the father's bloodline.

Native Americans were also **collectivists**, meaning they lived in communities where dependence on others, responsibility for others, working together and sharing the profits, and living with and caring for extended family was valued. For example, in tribes that were agriculturalist in nature, the women of the village farmed communal fields and shared the produce with the entire village. Similarly, when the men went on a hunt, the meat was shared by the entire village.

This contrasts with Europeans who were **individualists**, meaning they valued self-reliance, personal upward mobility, privacy, and living with their nuclear, rather than their extended families.

In Module 2, we will learn about how these differences set the stage for conflict when Europeans arrived in America. But first, we'll take a look at specific tribes to see how they lived in pre-contact North America. This will be discussed in Part 2 of this presentation.

We will take a look at specific tribes to see how they lived in pre-contact North America.

League of the Iroquois: The Five Nations: During the 17th century, the Iroquois Confederation was a collection of tribes located in and around what is now the Northeastern United States and Southeastern Canada. They were also called the **Haudenosaunee** or the "People of the Longhouse."



Nonenmacher, R. A. *Iroquois Five-Nations Map*. 2004. Wikimedia Commons. Web. 25 April 2013.

The Iroquois Confederation was comprised of five tribes: Mohawk, Oneida, Onandagas, Cayugas, and Seneca. These five tribes formed themselves into the **Ganonsyoni**, or League of the Iroquois.

The League had about 10,000 people at the beginning of the 17th century and was formed by a **sachem** or chief named Hiawatha who wanted to find a way to end the inter-tribal feuds between the five tribes.

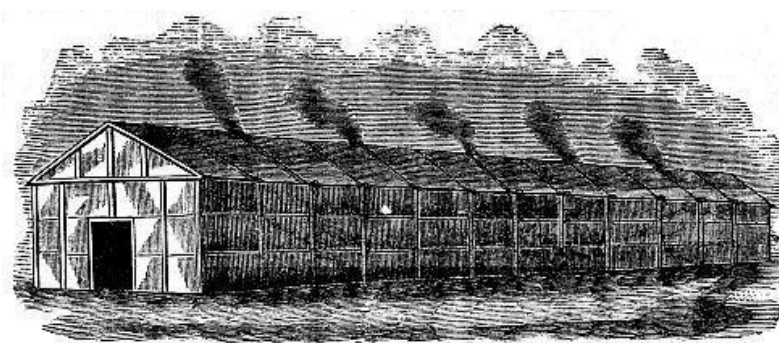
He proposed that if any tribe member had a grievance against a tribe member from a different tribe in the League, a **condolence ceremony**

would be performed to publicly acknowledge the wronged party's grievance. The ceremony would take the place of violent retaliation, avoiding conflict and bloodshed.

A **Council of 49 Chiefs** (leaders of the five nations of the league) delegated by the five nations was granted power to make decisions for all the villages. This council provided a political structure to ensure intra-Iroquois peace. Once peace was established, the quality of life improved for the Iroquois tribes.

This led to **population increase, village stability, the ability to solve internal problems**, and allowed the Iroquois to present a **united front** against their Algonkian neighbors and, eventually, the Europeans.

Iroquois Way of Life:



Long House of the Iroquois. (Bureau of Ethnology.)

Allen, E. A. *Long_House_Iroquois*. 1885. Wikimedia Commons. Web. 25 April 2013.

The Iroquois engaged in a communal way of life. Land was not owned by individuals and work was shared by all. Hunting was also a communal activity. When hunters returned to the village, the meat was divided by all, even though some hunters were more skillful than others. In these villages, men were primarily responsible for hunting and fishing and women were the

agriculturalists and were also responsible for child-rearing and homemaking. The Iroquois lived in what are called longhouses which were occupied by several families. Villages were comprised of many longhouses.

Matrilineal Society:

- In the longhouse lived the female members of the family with their husbands and their children:
 - Great-grandmother and husband
 - Grandmother and husband
 - Daughters and husbands
 - Granddaughters and husbands
 - Great-grandchildren
- When a male child grew up, he married and moved in with his wife's family.

In Iroquois society, lineage was traced through the female line. This structure accorded to Iroquois women a stature not enjoyed by European women. Within each longhouse lived the oldest woman of the family, her daughters and their husbands, her granddaughters and their husbands, and her married granddaughters with their husbands. Sons and grandsons remained with their kinship groups until they married at which time they joined their wives' families in their longhouses. Because married men lived with their wives' families, they were held to a certain standard when dealing with their wives. Also, unlike in European society, when a woman wished to divorce her husband, she simply placed her husband's possessions outside of the door of her family's longhouse.

Iroquois Kinship Group Structure: Iroquois villages were organized according to a **kinship group structure**. The **Ohwachira** was the smallest level of society and was comprised of several matrilineal kinship groups, or the families living with their grandmothers in the longhouses. So the Ohwachira might include many longhouses, each presided over by elderly women who might have been sisters and cousins. Several Ohwachiras grouped together made up a **clan**; several clans (about a dozen) combined to create a **village**; and several villages combined to make a **nation or kinship state**. Although it appeared as though the men ruled because they spoke in public and made decisions publicly, political authority in the villages came from the Ohwachiras and was, therefore, shared with women. The female heads of these Ohwachiras appointed the men who would represent the clans at village tribunal councils. The Ohwachiras also appointed the 49 sachems or chiefs who met periodically as the ruling council for the League of the Iroquois.

In order to ensure their positions of power, it was important that these chiefs remained in good favor with these women because, just as they placed them in power, these women could also **dehorn** or remove them from power. Because power was shared between the sexes, the European practice of male dominance and female subjugation in all things was a foreign concept to the Iroquois.

The Algonquians: Spiritual Beliefs: Another Northeastern group were the Algonquians. A close look at their society provides insight into Native spiritual and cultural practices. They had a belief in an impersonal power which permeates the universe.

- **Mana:** Impersonal power that permeates the universe
- **Manitou:** Algonquian term for unseen mysterious forces
- **Manitos:** Deities (gods, spirits) that took the form of all things animate and inanimate
- **Mesingw:** A manito that was the master of the animals; ensured balance remained between man and animals and hunters did not hunt more than needed; if man overhunted animals, Mesingw would take the animals away

This belief, called **mana**, was in some form shared by traditional peoples all over the world. Mana is a general term used by anthropologists as a generic reference to unseen mysterious forces. This was called “wakan” by the Sioux, “orenda” by the Iroquois and **manitou** by the Algonquians. It was a highly unpredictable force that could do harm as well as good and was expressed in deities called **manitos** who took the form of all things living and inanimate such as animals and trees.

One such manito was called **Mesingw**, the master of animals. Mesingw was important in what is now western Long Island, NY. Mesingw means “the Masked Being.” He appeared in human form, but his face was a large mask and his body was covered with a coat of thick black hair. His duty was to watch over both the hunter and the prey and to make sure that game was plentiful. He also had to ensure that the hunters appeased the manitos of the animals they killed. If the hunters killed indiscriminately or did not ask forgiveness of all the manitos after a kill, Mesingw would take the animals away to where they could not be found by the hunters.

Powwaw (Spiritual Leader): Pow wows were spiritual ceremonies led by spiritual leaders called powwas. The powwaws presided over seasonal ceremonies that were important for more than spirituality. People would come from villages far and wide to discuss Native American affairs important to area villages. Social and economic networks were strengthened at these gatherings, and families used these gatherings to arrange inter-clan marriages. These marriages strengthened ties between clans and increase social and economy stability.

Algonquian Rites of Passage: There were several rites of passage that Algonquian peoples experienced as they progressed through life.

The first rite of passage was the **burying of the umbilical cord** after birth. This was followed by the **naming ceremony**. After a child survived infancy, a namegiver would supervise a ceremony during which a child would receive the first of many names he or she would have in a lifetime.

For a girl, the **puberty rite** occurred after her first menstruation, at which time her hair was cut off and she was sent to a special wigwam where she was kept away from men for several weeks. For a boy the puberty rite occurred at the first signs of puberty at which point he was isolated from the village and was made to fast. He then underwent arduous initiation rituals

designed to prepare him for the hardships of hunting expeditions, warfare and open communication with the spirit world. During this time he was expected to receive a vision which would be interpreted by the powwaw. This vision was often the source of his new adult name and could determine his status in the community.

Another rite of passage was **marriage**. To arrange a marriage, the father of a male child went to the parents of a newborn female child with a gift of animal skins. If the baby girl's family accepted the gift, it meant that her parents agreed to the engagement. Refusal of the gift meant that no engagement would occur. If there was an agreement, a great wedding feast was prepared by both sets of parents for all relatives and friends. The babies were then suckled by both mothers at the same time to solidify the agreement. People who were not betrothed as children had much simpler marriage ceremonies and these unions were often less binding and less stable because the weight of both families was not behind the marriage.

The final rite of passage was the **funeral ritual** that would ensure that the departed spirit would find a restful place for eternity. People were often buried with special items or with dogs who were to act as protectors in the afterlife.