

THE AMERINDIAN WORLD

After our consideration of the “Creation of Two Worlds”, it should be clear that after the melting of the polar ice caps 10,000 years ago, two major cultural and biological worlds developed – one in Eurasia and Africa another in the Americas. Here we will survey the Amerindian World that developed in the Americas, focusing our attention on the Eastern Woodlands Culture Area.

I. Misconceptions

As we begin to consider the Amerindian world before Contact, perhaps it is best to start with some misconceptions.

A. The first and most pervasive concerns the land itself. Many Europeans at the time, and many people today, believe that the Americas were a "virgin land" at the time of Contact. That there were few - if any - people in the Americas, and that those people were somehow "environmentally pure" - that they did not manipulate their surroundings for their own good. This is simply wrong. People had lived in the Americas for at least 12,000 years, and they had been shaping their environment all that time. By the time Europeans arrived in the western hemisphere in 1492, perhaps 100 million people inhabited the two American continents, with maybe as many as 10 million living in North America. More conservative figures are 70 million and 7 million.

B. The second misconception is a more troublesome one. It is the term "Indians." Columbus was the first person to use this word to describe the peoples of the western hemisphere. He based the term on his belief that he had come to islands off the coast of India and Asia. Not only wrong in this geographical positioning of these peoples, but he was wrong in a more complicated sense. The word "Indians" makes a generalization that did not exist, since the peoples of the Americas did not - and do not - think of themselves as Indians, but as many different peoples. There was no "pan-Indian" spirit uniting the thousands of groups living in the Americas. So we have a problem. What do we call the peoples of the Americas? Here, I will employ the term "Amerindians." Although this term suffers from some of the above mentioned problems, it will serve our purposes here since we acknowledged its tenuousness.

II. What Fostered the Misconceptions Among Europeans

A. Different experiences of the Neolithic Revolution (7,000 BCE to 2,000 BCE) in Eurasia/Africa and the Americas

B. Less population density by the time the English settled in North America – although there were major Mesoamerican cities – because of the spread of disease.

C. Other reasons: different tools and modes of agriculture, the fact that Amerindians looked quite different than Europeans, different housing, many peoples were mobile, etc.

III. Eastern Woodlands Culture Area

A. Our discussion of the Amerindian world will be based on a limited area so that we may make some valuable generalizations and conclusions. We will focus on the Eastern Woodlands Culture Area, which is: East of the Mississippi River, North of the Gulf of Mexico, West of the Atlantic, South of the St. Lawrence drainage basin.

B. A Culture Area is defined by Anthropologist as a region with peoples sufficiently similar to discuss their: languages, subsistence patterns, housing, marriage customs, gender ways, and artistic motifs.

IV. Generalizations about the Eastern Woodlands Culture Area

A. There is a considerable diversity in language, with four language groups present, and different dialects within each group.

1. Algonquin, "New England" area
2. Iriquoian, between Hudson River and Lake Erie and Lake Ontario
3. Muskogean, Southeastern
4. Siouian, Southeastern

B. Subsistence patterns

1. 7000 – 5000 BCE first farming: cultivated planting was evident everywhere, and the diet supplemented by hunting
2. absence of iron tools, they are introduced by Europeans
3. no plow, although hoes are made in the east out of shell, stone, or fishbone
4. no draft animals or other domesticated animals except dog
5. no irrigation
6. fertilizers rarely used (fish heads or ground shells)
7. sea mammal hunting done by harpoon
8. Large animal hunting done with sling shot, spear, fire
9. Fishing done with hoots, nets, spears, traps
10. Cooking: boiling, earth oven (hole, hot rocks, covered for warmth), roasting, drying, salting
11. Most evident domesticated foods: corn, beans, squash
12. Deer most frequent single animal genus eaten

C. Housing

1. At the center of Iroquois society was the longhouse, a wooden structure eighteen feet wide, eighteen feet high, and sixty feet long. Central hall down the center – 6 to 10 ft. wide – on both sides were small booths where individual families lived. Each contained three to five fireplaces around which extended families, all related through the maternal bloodline, gathered. The whole place was made of pole binders covered with bark. No windows, light through doors and fire holes.
2. Also look at the Algonquin house built of bent poles and bark, with a hole in the top for smoke to escape. There are fires in all of the homes for warmth

D. Clothing

1. For the most part, furs were used for clothing.
2. In the South some plant materials were used.
3. Men wore a breech cloth, no shirt
4. Women wore a buckskin wraparound skirt to knees, no shirt
5. Men sometimes wore moccasins, women rarely did
6. Women usually wore long hair
7. Men usually shaved head or wore a scalp lock from crown of head.
8. Both sexes pierced their ears, men often pierced their noses
9. Both sexes plucked their body hair (often with clam shell tweezers)
10. Men esp. tattooed their bodies: pricked skin and pushed soot in for color

E. Military clothing

1. The Indians tightly wove reeds together to make a kind of armor, it was very effective
2. The Europeans were using chain mail, which could be penetrated by arrows.

F. Labor

1. Work was strictly gender defined
2. The male's duties entailed travel and "dangerous" work like hunting
3. The female's activities kept the women close to the settlement where they bore and raised children.

G. Stimulants

1. Not many "drugs," or mind altering stimulants used in the region. In the Southwest peyote was used, but not in the North or Southeast.
2. Tobacco was used everywhere
 - a. originates in South America
 - b. taken north early on
 - c. 1st knowledge of it in European world comes back with Columbus
 - d. 1st brought to Portugal in 1558; France 1560; Italy 1561.

3. Indians snuffed, chewed, smoked, ate, and drank tobacco. They said it comforted their limbs, made them sleepy, and lessened their weariness.
4. There was some use of persimmon wine
5. Also something called "black drink," which was a ceremonial emetic (which causes immediate vomiting). Used for ritual purification. Made from tree leaves and mashed tobacco.

H. Property Ownership

1. Ownership of property has three main aspects: a) privilege of use; b) privilege of disposal; c) privilege of destruction. These stages represent a scale of increasing control over property
2. There are generally two types of property: a) real estate (like land and housing) which is permanent b) chattel property (like tools, weapons, and household articles) which is movable.
3. Over the first type of property (real estate) most individual Indians had the privilege of use. This type of ownership is called a usufruct right. The land of housing of a tribe was generally held to be communal and no individual could sell or give it away. Land and property was for "use."
4. Over the second type of property (chattel property), most individual Indians had all three rights: use, disposal, and destruction.

I. Trade

1. Amerindians did trade "Amongst themselves," said Roger Williams, "they trade their Corne, skins, Coates, Venison, Fish, etc"(Cronon, 92).
2. Trade took place within the village and also between villages. The inter-village trade was limited, however, to adjacent villages, and there was no entrepreneurial class specifically focused on the carrying trade within Indian society(Cronon, 92-93).
3. Trade was sometimes facilitated by wampum (marine shells), but was usually done by barter.
4. Remember, in most cases, food could not be traded for something that was not food. You traded like items.

J. Religion

1. Animism
2. Religion came from the close relationship Amerindians had with the earth and animals.
3. Life was based fundamentally on farming and hunting or fishing.
4. Amerindians were dependent on these resources for survival and came to spiritualize the hunt or the planting seasons.
5. For more on this important topic see Carolyn Merchant's *Ecological Revolutions*.