

Chapter 1- Pre-Columbian Era

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Once upon a time . . .

Once upon a time there were no human beings (Homo sapien Sapien). Just animals and plants from little fluffy bunnies to behemoth mastodons. People were not indigenous to the Western Hemisphere, well, at least we have no evidence that people were indigenous to the Western Hemisphere. Rather, we believe that people migrated from Asia to what is today Alaska and Canada around 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. Our current archeological evidence (burned bones) suggests that people had settled into North America at least 35,000 years ago. The big lessons you need to understand in this chapter is that there existed some very old and established cultures long, long before the Europeans arrived because one outdated myth was that North America was an empty vessel and Europeans turned it into a venerable Garden of Eden.

We believe that most Asian immigrants were hunters and gathers -they got their caloric intake through hunting animals and by collecting naturally-growing roots, tubers, and berries. Hunting and gathering is not the best way to ensure your caloric intake. First, hunting and gathering is very timely and caloric intensive, second, relying on nature is sometimes problematic. What do you do in the winter? What if there is a drought? What if a pestilence destroys the wild-growing plants? Thus, we believe that shortly after arriving to North America, Amerindians (the descendants of the original waves of Asiatic immigrants) settled down and thus embraced agriculture. There are four interconnected results to the development of agriculture: First, life becomes more stable as people are less reliant on hunting and gathering for their caloric intake. Second, agriculture is a more reliable and diverse food source. Third, agriculture resulted in the growth of cities or towns -spaces were people collected themselves. And, in many of the Amerindian communities, archeologists have discovered walls surrounding the permanent buildings. Now, there are two reasons for walls: 1) to protect the people inside from the nasty stuff outside; or, 2) to keep people in; to keep them from leaving. Nevertheless, the growth of communities meant the creation of permanent structures, normally built near fresh water sources, and they built canals (for irrigation), dikes, and roads. These work projects tend to imply that there also existed some form of government or body that makes decisions as to where to build the canals or where to put the roads. Unfortunately, Amerindians embraced an oral tradition of passing down history and thus you will not come across any diaries, papers, or documents that fully tell the story of Amerindian life.

Development of Farming

People settled down in ecologically diverse regions such as being surrounded by a lake in what is today the center of Mexico City, or in the desert such as the Anasazi of the Four Corner area of what became the American Southwest, or the woodlands of what became New England. Ecology tended to present challenges to farming. For example, Aztecs settled down on an island, surrounded by a huge lake, in what is today Mexico City. Land on an island is extremely limited and so with a growing population, the Aztecs needed to invent a new way of farming, hence the chinampas or bog-farming. Aztecs would create floating patches of land (bogs) near the shores of the lake that surrounded their island. Over time the bogs fanned out, eventually filling in the

lake with usable farm land. Likewise, the Anzazi people lived in a desert so they faced particular challenges to farming. There are very few places in a desert where water comes to the surface, and those places are called oases. An oasis is, simply put, a place in the desert where the water table comes to the surface of the land. Now, an oasis is a relatively small chunk of land, just like the bog farmers of central Mexico, thus their crops they grew had to be carefully selected for their caloric punch, ease of growth, and ease of storage. Finally, Indians such as the Seneca in what became New England also had to deal with ecological issues. For example, trees. Lots of trees. The Seneca lived in the woodlands. Thus in order to farm they had to remove trees, but they did so in a time before electric saws. They did not even have iron tools nor oxen to assist them. The result was the creation of small patches of farmable land. Interestingly enough, the Aztecs, Anasazi, and Seneca farmed similar crops. Wherever you go in pre-Colombian America, you tend to discover that Indians grew the same holy trinity of crops: Corn, Beans, and Squash. They grew corn because of the caloric value. Corn is full of sugars (carbs) and can easily be ground into flour, baked, boiled, or mashed. Corn tended to be the basis of Indian cooking. Now for those of you who are not farmers, corn grows erect, however its roots are very shallow and can easily be baked by an unrelenting hot summer sun. The Indians also planted squash to shield the corn's roots. You see, squash (from Acorn squash to zucchini) tends to grow low and close to the ground and all squash have large, umbrella-like leaves that if planted around corn, could act as a shield to the rays of the sun. Finally, also keeping in mind Indians' need to grow crops in every patch of land, Indians would grow beans. Now beans grow up and out, however in order to produce the bean, the plant must climb off the ground and so in their pursuit of saving spaces, Indians planted beans right next to corn, so that the bean plant would use the corn plant as its trellis.

Mesoamerican Indians (South)

OLMECS. One of the oldest known Indian tribes in the Americas were a group that lived in present-day Mexico, called the Olmecs. We believe that Olmecs had a government, believed in many gods (pantheism), and held elaborate religious ceremonies through the oral traditions passed down.

MAYAS. Again, the Mayas did not leave a written record, per se. They left behind a calendar and hieroglyphics. They also left behind their oral tradition passed down from the Olmecs to the Aztecs, and then intercepted by the Spanish in the early sixteenth century. What we know about the Mayans is that they developed very elaborate social and political systems, with numerous religious and temporal leaders, daily observances, and they were dependent on controlling the cacao trade out of present-day Guatemala. They also developed huge cities, around a half a million people which rivaled anything in Europe at that time. One interesting fact about these people was that they had a teeth fetish. Long before rappers such as Chamillionaire sported gold and silver throughout their teeth, the Mayans were drilling holes in teeth and inserting precious and semi precious stones. They would also carve the teeth. We believe the focus on the teeth had something to do with Mayan status in society.

AZTECS. The Aztecs were not indigenous to Mexico. Rather they migrated there from the American Southwest in the early twelfth century. They fought their way to what is today Mexico City, establishing an elaborate system of bog-farming. They were brutal and conquered all. The Aztecs expanded on the collection of old Mayan deities and most of the Aztec gods demanded

daily tribute, usually in the form of a human sacrifice. Finally, the Aztecs developed a ball game. Played in huge courts, the object of the game was for one player to kick or knock a ball through a hoop ten feet off the ground without using their hands. Games would last for days. Sometimes the winners would be sacrificed to the gods. Sometimes the losers were sacrificed. And sometimes everyone would be sacrificed. One reason why the Spanish were able to so quickly conquer Mexico was because the Aztecs terrorized every other tribe and thus the other tribes threw their lot in with the Spanish.

Mesoamerican Indians (North)

In what became the United States, there lived hundreds of thousands of people from dozens upon dozens of tribes or affiliations. They spoke different languages. They developed different cultural strategies, however they tended to be tied together by trade and thus what we will look at below are some of the shared characteristics of Indians who lived in North America. Again, nearly none of these Indians embraced the written record, thus what we know about them tends to be handed down orally over time. From Indian to Indian, from Indians to European, and from European to historian.

One of the more less-understood cultures was the Mississippian Society. These Indians lived along the banks of the Mississippi and their main characteristic were the mounds they built and left behind, thus they are also known as the mound-builders. Most of the mounds are just that -a mound. A few were built in the likeness of animals, such as a snake when viewed from above.

Another tribe was the Iroquois, who actually were not an Indian tribe per se, but rather a political organization made up of several tribes from the Northeast: Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, Mohawk and the Tuscarora (who joined after the previous five). These six tribes lived in a densely populated region and frequently went to war with each other over access to resources. The Iroquois was a farming people and farming was a woman's job. The most important or powerful women in the Iroquois community farmed corn. The head of the corn farmers also selected their tribe's representatives on the Iroquois council and they instructed the male representative how they would vote on council matters. Thus Iroquois women were quite influential in their community, especially compared to European women of the time.

Cherokee

An example of an Indian tribe that lived in what became the Southeast portion of the United States are the Cherokee. The Cherokee were matrilineally descendant, meaning they got their names from their mothers. Women were powerful in Cherokee society. When a man and a woman got married, the man packed his belongings and moved into his wife's house. Actually, the house belonged to her mother. So gentlemen, your mother-in-law would rule the Cherokee household and when she died, the eldest daughter took over. Cherokee had divorce, however only women could initiate the proceedings.

Chinook

Living in the Pacific Northwest was something akin to living in a grocery store. There was an overabundance of berries, farm land, fish, and game. There were so many resources that the people of the Pacific Northwest had no need to fight over the resources. With a lot of extra time

(and money) on their hands, Indians of the Pacific Northwest, such as the Chinook, developed artwork. For example, they built and decorated totem poles. Chinook women made highly decorated (with beads) clothing and blankets. Indian women, because they were not supporting their men in combat, had time to develop arts and crafts. In fact, Indians of the Pacific Northwest developed a kind of an anti-war strategy they called the Potlatch. Potlatch was a week-long festival. A meeting of Indians from Alaska to California on the banks of the Puget Sound, near the city of what we call today Seattle. Indians would come from far and wide with their excess building supplies, food, canoes, fishing equipment, clothes, et cetera, and trade with the other Indians. They also traded family members. For example, you live in Alaska and your child complains to you that if she sees one more snowflake her head will explode. So at the next Potlatch you send her with an Indian family from California and over the next year your daughter is taught about the language and customs of her newly adopted family. Then they bring her back at the next Potlatch where she shares all of her newly found knowledge to her original family. Potlatch continues today in Seattle, although today Potlatch is more of a celebration of Indian culture, although you can still get your fill of smoked salmon.

As I said at the beginning, Indians of North America spoke different languages and embraced different cultural strategies, yet they shared much in common. For example, they had a pantheon of gods but their chief god was almost always female such as "Mother Earth" or the "Corn Mother." All of these Indian societies embraced powerful positions (relative to European women) in their societies. They held seasonal festivals and they were animistic. They tended to see a spirituality in everything: rocks, birds, trees, clouds, rain and they believed in the connectivity between everything in nature and themselves.