



Contacts and Connections - 1521 to 1670

Educator Content Introduction: Proto-historic lifeways

Native North Americans did not have a written language when European explorers arrived. History and knowledge were transmitted verbally between Native people within communities, and from one generation to the next through **oral traditions** and storytelling. These ways of communicating history continue today and help contribute to how we know about Native American lifeways in the past. We also know about the past based on written accounts from Europeans who reported on the daily lives of Native Americans. Scholars studying Native American lifeways in the **proto-historic period**, or the period of early Native-European contact, combine modern Native American practices and oral histories with the observations written down by Europeans, along with artwork, music, clothing, and information from archaeological excavations. Blending these different ways of knowing about the past is an approach called **ethnohistory**. Through ethnohistory, people today know about the kinship relations, marriage practices, beliefs and mythology, and day-to-day household activities of Native Americans before and during the proto-historic period (Trigger, 1986).

An important part of Native American life involves understanding how people are related to one another. **Kinship** is the way people determine who is related to them and what type of relationships they have with others. Kinship can define who lives together in a household. For example, the household of most families living in the United States today consist of parents and their children. Extended family members include aunts, uncles, and grandparents, all from the same **lineage**, or line of descent from an ancestor. Most people in the United States today consider relatedness through the lineage of both parents, but this is not true in all societies. For example, in most Native American societies, kinship is traced only through the lineage of the mother and her relatives. In these **matrilineal** societies, “blood relatives” are only male and female relatives on the mother’s side of the family. Matrilineal is not the same as **matriarchy**, where rulership over a society is passed down through the mother’s lineage. In most Native American societies, political power was still mostly in the hands of men. However, houses, land, and certain other kinds of property were owned and controlled by women in the matrilineal group. A person’s father and his relatives were still considered important, but they were not thought of as relatives in the same way as the person’s mother and matrilineal aunts, uncles, and cousins were. In fact, a person’s uncle on their mother’s side was often a very important person and served as a father-figure in their life (Hudson, 1976, pp. 185-186).

Native Americans also related to one another based on **clan** membership. A clan is a category of people who believe themselves to be blood relatives, but who cannot trace their relationships to each other through a known lineage. Clans traced relatedness through a shared mythical relationship to an animal ancestor or natural phenomenon, like the Bear clan or the Wind clan. Clan membership in Native societies was inherited through the matrilineage.



Therefore, a person's clan affiliation was the same as that of their mother and her family. Several seemingly unrelated families had the same clan, creating ties that go beyond blood relations. Relatedness through a clan or matrilineage was important for many reasons, including deciding who were eligible marriage partners. Matrilineages and clans were **exogamous**, meaning they could only marry people outside of these social units (Hudson, 1976, pp. 193-197).

Another important aspect of Native lifeways that shaped how they interacted with one another and the world around them involves their beliefs. A **belief system** is a way to explain unusual events in everyday life. For Native Americans, this included categories that represented different aspects of the world that were natural and supernatural. Customs, practices, and rituals reflect these beliefs. One example of a belief common among many Native Americans in the Southeast was that the world we live in is an island suspended from the sky by four cords at each of the **cardinal directions**, meaning north, south, east, and west. Above This World was the sky vault, which was an inverted bowl of solid rock that rose and fell twice each day—at dawn and at dusk—so the sun and moon could pass beneath it. Below This World was the Under World, which contained evil beings and spirits. Animals were categorized based on their associations with each of the three worlds. For example, birds were from the Upper World, four-footed animals like deer were from This World, and snakes, lizards, frogs, and fish were from the Under World. Colors also had meanings and social values based on beliefs. Certain colors were associated with the four cords, or cardinal directions, holding This World. Because there were many different societies of Native Americans each with their own belief systems, not all Native peoples assigned the same meanings to colors and animals in the exact same way (Hudson, 1976, pp. 120-132).

Native people lived together in towns made up with as few as a dozen houses to as many as a hundred. Houses were often made with a wooden frame that was covered in **wattle and daub**. The “wattle” consisted of thin strips of bark or wood woven across the wooden frame. Daub was a sticky clay-based substance that was used to cover the wattle, which created strong walls when it dried. Some Native North Carolinians built two houses, one enclosed, warm house for the winter, and one open (often three-sided) house for the warm summers. The roof of the house was made of woven grasses and river cane, and winter houses had a small hole at the top so smoke from the **hearth** could escape. The hearth was in the middle of the house, and was a fire used to warm the home and cook food. At night everyone in the family slept in the house around the fire (Hill, 1997, pp. 68-70).

The house was the domain of women in Native American societies, and included the structure itself, the surrounding “yard,” and nearby pits or buildings where food was stored. Most daily household activities took place outside of the house. In addition to tending larger agricultural fields, women often kept a small garden next to their house. Food was stored outside, either in **storage pits** dug into the ground nearby, or in above ground **corn cribs**. Storage pits were lined with a fibrous material like cane or bark before food stuffs such as nuts and roots



were stored in them. Storage pits functioned similarly to refrigerators used today by keeping food cool before it was eaten. Corn was kept in cribs, or small structures elevated above ground by four posts. This kept the corn dry and free of pests. The area outside of the house served as a place for many daily activities, including weaving baskets and mats, making clothing and pottery, processing food, and cooking (Hill, 1997, p. 70).

Many of the objects made by Native American women had a practical use, like storing food or cooking, but they were also carefully crafted works of art. For example, items woven out of plant fibers like rivercane were practical and beautiful. **Rivercane** is a type of bamboo native to the Southeast and very important for Native American communities. Native women used cane to make a number of woven household items like baskets, mats, and wall coverings. Women managed **canebrakes**, or dense patches of rivercane, by periodically burning them to rejuvenate the soil, and by cutting cane to create openings in the brakes for new stems to grow. Stalks of cane were then split into four to eight pieces, making it pliable enough to be woven together. Cane splits were often dyed different colors, using natural dyes made from plants like black walnuts, bloodroot, and pokeweed. Baskets were often **double-woven**, meaning they had an interior and exterior wall, making them extremely durable and waterproof. Other materials, like split oak and vines, were also used to make baskets in the proto-historic period (Hill, 1997, pp. 61-62).

Villages were often bustling with activity, which included both household chores and public gatherings. Houses were organized around a **town center**, which served as the public space for village interactions and celebrations. The town center included an open public area called a **plaza**. For Mississippian cultures, earthen mounds were also located on the plaza. **Townhouses**, which were large buildings that served as community centers, were at the heart of town life. Townhouses were shaped like regular houses, but were much bigger in size. Whereas houses were the domain of women, the townhouse was a place for men to gather and discuss war and politics, or receive visitors. Men would sit on wooden benches around the inside of the townhouse, and in the center would be a hearth with a burning fire. When the weather was nice, the plaza was a place for games, dances, and rituals (Hudson, 1976, pp. 219-221).

Native Americans often played **ball games** in the plaza. These games were sometimes referred to as “the little brother of war” since they were used to keep the peace and settle disputes among tribes. One game was called “**chunkey**,” and involved two players competing by rolling disc-shaped stones across a smooth piece of ground. Each player would then throw poles at the stone, and the winner was the person who came closest to the stone after it stopped rolling. Another game, called “**stick ball**,” was similar to lacrosse, and involved using long hickory sticks with netted mitts on the end use to catch a deerskin ball. The number of players on each side varied, from as few as 20 to 40 players, to as many as 100 per side. Goals were set up across from one another in a playing field that could be as much as a quarter of a mile long. Players passed the ball using the sticks, and it was against the rules to touch the ball with your hands.



Old medicine men would serve the ball by throwing it up in the air in the center of the plaza, and acted as referees on each side. Spectators gathered to watch from the sidelines. Scores were tallied by how many times the ball was passed through the goal posts (Swanton, 1947, pp. 675-676, 682).

Native American life during the proto-historic period was very similar to life before the arrival of Europeans. Women tended their homes, grew crops, and raised children. Men met in the townhouse, hunted, went to war, and played games. Everyone came together for celebrations and feasts in the plaza several times a year. Early European explorers visited some towns in North Carolina, but many Native people did not interact with Europeans until after European colonies were established. However, as more European settlers arrived in North America, life became very different for Native North Carolinians.

Possible Essential Historical Questions:

Middle grades

- What is the difference between a matrilineage and a clan?
- Describe some of the games Native Americans played.

High school

- How do we know about proto-historic Native American lifeways?
- What is exogamy and how does it apply to the types of lineages in Native American societies?

Keywords:

ball game

belief system

canebrake

cardinal direction

chunkey

clan

corn crib

double-woven basket

ethnohistory

exogamous



hearth
kinship
lineage
matriarchy
matrilineal
plaza
proto-historic period
rivercane
stick ball
storage pit
town center
townhouse
wattle and daub

Resources:

Hudson, Charles M., *Conversations with the High Priest of Coosa*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Learn about Southeast Indian Tribes. UNC Pembroke Museum of the Southeast American Indian. <https://www.uncp.edu/resources/museum-southeast-american-indian/education/learn-about-southeast-indian-tribes>

Essential Understandings. Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian. <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/about/understandings>

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Hudson, C. M., (1976). *The Southeastern Indians*. University of Tennessee Press.

Swanton, J. R., (1946). *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*. Bulletin No. 137, The Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology.

Trigger, B. G., (1986). The unfinished edifice. *Ethnohistory* 33(3), 253-267.