

## Chapter One

# CULTURE

*Do American Indians have a common cultural heritage? From a nationwide perspective, the general answer would have to be “no.” The stereotypical image of horse-mounted warriors...is far from being representative of the diverse cultural heritage of all Native Americans.*

**Jack Utter**

*American Indians: Answers to Today’s Questions*

### Introduction

The specific cultural traditions of Native Americans are as diverse as the large number of tribes they represent. Each tribe, as a distinct entity, has developed its own set of unique customs and cultural practices over the course of history. These traditions are an integral part of the way the tribe expresses its spirituality, values, and religious beliefs and they are evident in most aspects of daily life such as language, celebrations, ceremonies, cuisine, and even recreation.

Despite the unique traits of each tribe’s traditions, Native American people living in the same geographical area often shared a similar language and way of life; the regions in which these groups lived may be referred to as “culture areas.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars have identified ten or more culture areas based on factors such as geographical influence, family and kinship systems, seasonal life, and economic structure.<sup>2</sup> While the culture areas provide a useful framework, it is important to keep in mind that tribal territories often shifted and as tribes moved, their cultural traits were introduced to new areas.

As described in Chapter 6, after European settlement, many tribes were displaced from their original lands. Despite the move from their culture area and the influence of modern life, some traditions and cultural influences of tribal life are evident even today. However, as travel, communication, and inter-tribal marriage has increased over the past decades, the blending of cultural traits has increased as well.

This section summarizes the major culture areas in North America and introduces factors which influenced their culture and lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> Following the summary is a brief description of selected cultural traditions.

### The Tribes of the Northern Culture Areas

#### Eskimo (Inuit) and Aleut

The Eskimo and Aleut people live in Northern Alaska and Canada, part of the Arctic culture area. Eskimos refer to themselves as “Inuit” which means “the people.” As skilled hunters and

fishermen, the lifestyle of the Eskimo and Aleut peoples is shaped largely by the harsh climate and terrain of the lands in which they live. Because plant life is scarce here, the Eskimos and Aleut became skilled hunters. Also skilled craftsmen, the people of the Arctic were known for kayaks, snowshoes, igloos, spiked boots, and hide tents.

### **Kutchin, Chipewyan, and Cree**

Many people live in the Subarctic culture area, which includes most of Alaska and Canada. They have been divided into two major groups based on their languages--the Kutchin and Chipewyan groups spoke Athabaskan while the Cree spoke the Algonquian language. Because the climate and terrain was not conducive to farming, these groups tended to be hunters, gatherers, and trappers. Many of the bands were influenced by other Indian bands; for example, the Kutchin used sleds and snowshoes similar to the Eskimos, while their homes were more similar to the tepees used by the Plains Indians.

### **Kwakiutl**

The Kwakiutl is one of many Native American groups that lived along the Northwest Coast. The Eyak, Tlingit, Nootka, and Chinook are examples of other groups that inhabited this area. Warmer weather and heavy rainfall are characteristic of this region in comparison to the other northern culture areas, so that the Kwakiutl and other groups here had many food sources from both the land and sea. The heavily forested areas also promoted a tradition of skilled woodworking, with craftsman creating everything from canoes to totem poles. Another popular tradition among the Northwest Coast tribes was the potlatch, a celebration and feast, during which the host established rank by giving away his belongings.



Indian Cultural Areas

## The Tribes of the Eastern Culture Areas

### Powhatan and Massachuset

The Powhatan and Massachuset are among the tribes that inhabited the woodlands of the Northeast. Neighboring tribes along the Atlantic coast included the Micmac in Canada, the Mohegan in Connecticut, and the Secotan in North Carolina. With both the woodlands and the ocean in their environment, hunting and fishing were both successful means of sustenance. As two of the earliest tribes to live side-by-side with early European settlers, both the Powhatan and Massachuset were influenced not only by conflicts that ensued, but by non-Indian traditions and lifestyles.

### Iroquois, Ojibwa, and Menominee

The Iroquois, Ojibwa, and Menominee are also among the tribes that inhabited the Northeast, to the west of the Powhatan and Massachuset. Neighboring tribes in this area included the Shawnee, Potawatomi, and Algonquian. The Iroquois included six major tribes which all spoke the Iroquois language. They were largely farmers who relied upon various types of rice as a

staple food. Large houses were constructed in their villages and generally housed up to ten families. In this society, women were powerful, playing a strong leadership role and even passing along the family name.



### Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole

The Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole are among the tribes that inhabited the Southeast. Neighboring tribes in this area included the Choctaw, Atakapa, and Yuchi. It is believed that these tribes, who developed a relatively advanced culture, descended from the ancient peoples

known as Mound Builders. They were successful farmers and hunters who built and lived in large settlements. The Cherokee were a large and powerful tribe which formed a union of “red towns” for war ceremonies and “white towns” for peace ceremonies. The Creek lived in towns organized around a central plaza where they built pyramids topped with a temple. This led some to believe that they were influenced by Mexican tribes. Festivals, such as the midsummer Green

Corn Festival, where it is believed that every crime except murder was forgiven, were an important part of life for the Creek.

## **Great Plains and Western Tribes**

### **Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Dakota (Sioux)**

The Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Dakota are among the tribes that inhabited the grasslands of the Great Plains, which encompassed a large, central region of the United States. Their neighbors included the Crow, Blackfeet, and Pawnee tribes and the lifestyle of this culture area is what many people envision when picturing “Indian culture.” That familiar lifestyle was influenced by the arrival of Europeans and, in particular, the introduction of horses. Horses made herding bison, and other aspects of their lifestyle, easier. Some of the tribes became expert horse trainers, especially the Comanche. The bison hunt was a central event and tribes utilized every part of the bison to fashion familiar items including tepees, moccasins, and handtools.

### **Shoshone, Ute, and Paiute**

The Shoshone, Ute, and Paiute are among the tribes that inhabited the Great Basin, the large desert region surrounded by mountains in the western United States. The limited food sources found in the desert presented a challenge, but the tribes were resourceful, eating everything from seeds to snakes. They made baskets to collect and store seeds and other food items. Families lived in cone-shaped wickiups and would scatter to look for food during the summer, gathering for festivals and hunts in the fall and winter. Some of these tribes, who lived in groups of less than fifty, were influenced by the tribes of the Great Plains. For example, some of the Shoshone acquired horses, easing some of their challenges.

### **Klamath**

The Klamath inhabited the Plateau culture area, which stretches from the northwest United States to southwestern Canada. Neighboring tribes included the Modoc, Flathead, and Spokane. The forests, grasslands, and rivers provided an abundance of food and many of the Klamath settled on the shores of marshes and lakes. Their “pit houses” were shallow holes framed with logs and a roof made of brush. The Klamath were skilled with the bow and arrow and were sometimes involved in conflicts with other tribes. Like the Shoshone, the tribes of the Plateau eventually acquired horses and benefitted from some of the same lifestyle advantages as the tribes of the Plains.

### **Chumash**

The Chumash inhabited the California area where the weather was mild and a wide variety of wild plants and animals could be found. Neighboring tribes included the Shasta, Miwok, and Cahuilla. While coastal dwellers relied on seafood, the acorn was an important food source inland, as the tribes ground it into flour to make soup and bread. Coastal tribes also made rafts and canoes; the Chumash were the only tribe known to build boats made from wooden planks.

The boats were probably used for fishing and for travel between the mainland and off-shore islands.

### **Apache, Navajo, and Hopi**

The Apache, Navajo, and Hopi were among the tribes that inhabited the rugged terrain of the Southwest. Neighboring tribes included the Zuni, Papago, and Upper Pima. The tribes of this area had differing lifestyles, as some were hunter-gatherers who moved around and others were more stationary farmers. The Navajos, who lived in cone-shaped hogans made from logs and sticks covered with earth, were also expert weavers and silversmiths. The Apache, who moved frequently and lived in dome-shaped huts, were skilled with the bow and arrow. The Hopi built large pueblos, buildings with many levels made of adobe. Their towns were often built on high mesas or flat-topped mountains and they believed in supernatural beings known as “kachinas.” Kachina masks were a typical part of ceremonial dress for men, and parents made kachina dolls for their children.

## **Selected Traditions**

### **The Powwow**

A powwow, sometimes also written as pow wow or pow-wow, is a North American dance festival with many other associated events. At first glance, the music, singing, dancing, and colorful dress of a powwow may lead an observer to conclude that a powwow is purely a form of entertainment. While it is a lively and joyous event, the powwow goes beyond entertainment and “is a spiritual legacy which should be treated with respect and honor.”<sup>5</sup> The modern-day powwow is, like those of the past, an occasion for Native American families and friends to gather; indeed, many travel hundreds of miles to attend. “It is a time of sharing, of laughter and tears, of learning, and of caring. It is a time when Indians reflect on their traditions. It is a time to honor the past and celebrate the future.”<sup>6</sup>

The word “powwow” comes from the Algonquian word “pau wau” which described medicine men and spiritual leaders. The modern powwow probably evolved from dance celebrations known as Grass Dances which were held by members of elite warrior societies. Today, these weekend-long events include contest dancing for children, men and women; the Tiny Tots category includes children under five while the Golden Age category includes men and women over fifty. The men and boys compete in the styles of dance known as Fancy Dancing, Grass Dancing, and Traditional Dancing. Fancy or Shawl Dancing, Jingle Dress, and Traditional Dancing round out the competitions for women and girls.

All of the dance styles are accompanied by a specific costume or style of dress. For example, the men’s Fancy Dance regalia includes brightly colored feathers and sheep bells, while the women’s Jingle Dress may include beadwork, an eagle tail, and jingles fastened to the dress. Special roles, including master of ceremonies, arena director, head dancers, and host drum, are assigned to knowledgeable and talented individuals. There are usually two head dancers, a man and a woman, whose job it is to represent their style of dance and serve as a model for other dancers.

Other aspects of the powwow include the Gourd Dance, a ceremonial dance performed by members of certain warrior clans or societies and the Round Dance, a dance for both participants and spectators, which is performed in a circle to a drum beat. After the powwow, there may be a gathering called a Forty-Nine, in which participants gather and sing forty nine songs.

Each year there are scores of powwows throughout the United States and though each one may have its own character, participants are guaranteed an uplifting event filled with color, music, dance, and reflection--on Native American traditions of the past and present.

## **Lacrosse**

Lacrosse is one of the world's fastest growing sports today, but did you know that the sport originated with Native Americans? The earliest records of lacrosse date back to the 1630's and the oldest surviving lacrosse sticks date back to the early 1800's. Although the early historical data about the sport is incomplete, it is believed that tribes in the eastern half of the United States played lacrosse, particularly in the southeast, around the western Great Lakes, and in the St. Lawrence Valley.<sup>7</sup>

Native American lacrosse players made their own playing sticks, which varied in size and shape depending on the tribe's region. The basic techniques of the game also varied as some played a double-stick (one stick in each hand) game and others played with a single-stick. Based on the equipment, the type of goal used, and the stick-handling techniques, three basic forms have been identified: the southeastern, Great Lakes, and Iroquoian forms.

The game was named "lacrosse" by the early French settlers; "crosse" is the French term for a curved stick. In the mid-nineteenth century, Canadians embraced lacrosse and adapted it using a new set of rules. Beyond playing for recreation, lacrosse played other roles in Native American culture. In the past it served as an outlet for aggression and was even, at times, used to settle territorial disputes among tribes. It has also been used for medicinal or curative purposes, is sometimes believed to be influenced by the supernatural, and continues to be surrounded with ceremony.<sup>8</sup>

During the late 1800's, lacrosse was sometimes discouraged by government officials and missionaries, decreasing its popularity in some Native American communities. Today, however, lacrosse is still a favorite pastime of many tribes. In fact, the Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, Yuchi, and other southeastern tribes continue to play a double-stick game and the Iroquois tribes continue to play their own form of the game.

## Language

Historically, Native Americans who lived in the same area often spoke the same or similar languages. There has never been a single "Indian language" in North America. Estimates of the total number of American Indian languages in North America at the time of first contact vary, but it is generally believed that there were between 500 and 600 languages.<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that approximately 150 of these languages are still in existence today; some of which have only a small number of speakers remaining.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to determine the precise number of speakers remaining for each language, though it is estimated that over 350,000 people speak native languages in the United States today.<sup>11</sup>

The languages, which can be grouped into language families, had complex grammatical structures and vocabularies and many were so distinctive that tribes could not understand other tribes' languages. In some cases, when tribes with very different languages met, they developed a sign language that enabled them to communicate.<sup>12</sup>

Traditionally, native languages were passed down as part of a tribe's strong oral tradition. In fact, language played a key role in maintaining a tribe's cultural heritage as stories and traditions were passed down orally between generations.<sup>13</sup> Some of the languages were eventually written down by missionaries and others; however as the federal government became involved, Native Americans were often forbidden to speak their languages. The boarding schools that were set up to educate Native Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s are often remembered for penalizing Native American children who spoke their native language.

Despite the suppression of native languages, many of them still exist and are spoken today. Some of the languages spoken today bear little or no resemblance to each other, but some of them are related. For example, the languages spoken by the Navajo and Apache are part of the Athabascan family of languages; thus, the Navajo and Apache can often understand one another. However, the Tlingit in Alaska who speak an Athabascan language cannot understand Navajos or Apaches.<sup>14</sup>

Today many tribes greatly value their native languages and have dedicated significant effort and resources into reviving and preserving them. For Native Americans, speaking their language is a way of expressing their unique identity and culture, and it is often a critical part of religious practices and other cultural traditions. Much would be lost without the native languages as many words either cannot be translated into English or lose much of their meaning during the translation.

Although there are not always exact translations for Native American words, many common terms and geographic place names in the United States are derived from Native American languages (see page 1.10).

## **U.S. State Names Derived from Native Languages<sup>15</sup>**

### **Alabama**

Indian for tribal town, later a tribe (Alabamas or Alibamons) of the Creek confederacy.

### **Alaska**

Russian version of Aleutian (Eskimo) word, alakshak, for "peninsula," "great lands," or "land that is not an island."

### **Arizona**

Spanish version of Pima Indian word for "little spring place," or Aztec arizuma, meaning "silver-bearing."

### **Arkansas**

French variant of Quapaw, a Siouan people or Sioux tribe, meaning "downstream people."

### **Connecticut**

From Mohican and other Algonquin words meaning "long river place."

### **Delaware**

Named for Lord De La Warr, early governor of Virginia; first applied to river, then to Indian tribe (Lenni-Lenape), and the state.

### **Hawaii**

Possibly derived from native word for homeland, Hawaiki or Owhyhee.

### **Illinois**

French for Illini or land of Illini, Algonquin word meaning men or warriors.

### **Indiana**

Means "land of the Indians."

### **Iowa**

Indian word variously translated as "one who puts to sleep" or "beautiful land."

## **Kansas**

Sioux word for "south wind people."

## **Kentucky**

Indian word variously translated as "dark and bloody ground," "meadow land" and "land of tomorrow."

## **Massachusetts**

From Indian tribe named after "large hill place" identified by Capt. John Smith as being near Milton, Mass.

## **Michigan**

From Chippewa words *mici gama* meaning "great water," after the lake of the same name.

## **Minnesota**

From Dakota Sioux word meaning "cloudy water" or "sky-tinted water" of the Minnesota River.

## **Mississippi**

Probably Chippewa; *mici zibi*, "great river" or "gathering-in of all the waters." Also: Algonquin word, "Messipi."

## **Missouri**

An Algonquin Indian term meaning "river of the big canoes."

## **Nebraska**

From Omaha or Otos Indian word meaning "broad water" or "flat river," describing the Platte River.

## **North and South Dakota**

Dakota is Sioux for friend or ally.

## **Ohio**

Iroquois word for "fine or good river."

## **Oklahoma**

Choctaw coined word meaning red man, proposed by Rev. Allen Wright, Choctaw-speaking Indian, who said: *Okla humma* is red people.

## **Tennessee**

*Tanasi* was the name of Cherokee villages on the Little Tennessee River. From 1784 to 1788 this was the State of Franklin, or Frankland.

## **Texas**

Variant of word used by Caddo and other Indians meaning friends or allies, and applied to them by the Spanish in eastern Texas. Also written *texias*, *tejas*, *teysas*.

## **Utah**

From a Navajo word meaning upper, or higher up, as applied to a Shoshone tribe called Ute.

## **Wisconsin**

An Indian name, spelled *Ouisconsin* and *Mesconsin* by early chroniclers. Believed to mean "grassy place" in Chippewa. Congress made it Wisconsin.

## **Wyoming**

The word was taken from Wyoming Valley, Pa., which was the site of an Indian massacre and became widely known by Campbell's poem, "Gertrude of Wyoming." In Algonquin it means "large prairie place."

## Some Common Terms Derived from Native Languages<sup>16</sup>

### **Hickory**

Alteration of the earlier *pohickery*, which is derived from the Algonquian *pawcohicora*.

### **Moose**

From the Natick *moos*. (Natick is a dialect based on English and the language of the Massachuset tribe spoken in the village of Natick.)

### **Opossum**

From the Powhatan *apossoum*.

### **Papoose**

From the Algonquian *papoos*, meaning a North American Indian infant or young child.

### **Pecan**

From the Algonquian *paccan*.

### **Racoon**

From the Algonquian (Virginia) *arathkone*.

### **Sachem**

From the Narraganset *sachim*, meaning chief.

### **Skunk**

From the Massachuset *squnck*.

### **Squash**

From the Massachuset *askootasquash*.

### **Succotash**

From the Narraganset *msickquatash*.

## Endnotes

1. *Rand McNally; Discovery Atlas of Native Americans*; (c) 1994 Rand McNally and Company.
2. *American Indians: Answers to Today's Questions*; (c) 1993 National Woodlands Publishing Company.
3. Ibid. The descriptions on pages 1.1 through 1.6 are based on *Rand McNally: Discovery Atlas of Native Americans*.
4. Id at 1.
5. *1996 Guide to Powwows and Gatherings U.S.A. & Canada*; (c) 1995 The Book Publishing Company.
6. Ibid.
7. *A Brief History of American Indian Lacrosse*; Thomas Vennum, Jr.
8. Ibid.
9. *American Indian Environmental Office Training Module*; United States Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Water
10. *How many indigenous American languages are spoken in the United States? By how many speakers?* National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education ([www.ncbe.gwu.edu](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu)).
11. Ibid.
12. *Native American Religions: World Religions*; (c) 1997 Facts On File, Inc.
13. Ibid.
14. Id at 9.

15. Indigenous Peoples Survival Foundation (IPSF) web site ([www.indigenouspeople.org](http://www.indigenouspeople.org)).

16. *Webster's II New College Dictionary*; (c) 1995 Houghton Mifflin Company.

## Suggested Activities

1. Host an event with a festive powwow or potlatch theme at your site. Consider having the event catered or get the employees involved by making it a potluck celebration. For a potluck event, ask employees to try Native American recipes (see Activity 2 below). To incorporate the theme, you might explain the powwow or potlatch tradition on invitations or flyers, use brightly colored decorations and traditional music (see Activity 5 below) for a powwow, or give away door prizes at a potlatch. You won't be able to include all the elements of these traditional celebrations, but it would be a fun and educational theme.

2. There are many Native American recipes, some simple, some more complex, available on the Internet. Check out the following sites to get started:

<http://www.kstrom.net/isk/food/recipes.html> (has links to native cookbooks as well as recipes for wild rice, maple sugar/syrup, beans and greens, corn, hominy, and more)

<http://www.nativetech.org/food/> (has recipes for beverages and teas, plants, fruits, vegetables, meats, breads, nuts, seeds, grains, and more)

<http://www.geocities.com/NapaValley/4722/indian.html> (links to recipes for breads, soups, salads, desserts, and more)

3. Here is a simple recipe for a popular Native American dish: Indian Fry Bread. Fry Bread is a staple for feasts after sweats, at Powwow, an Honor dinner or any cultural gathering. This recipe is from Tall Mountain and Summerwolf (French/Danish/English/Lenape) and was handed down from family and friends. The recipe could be displayed or distributed to employees who may want to try their hand at Native American cooking.

### Indian Fry Bread

Ingredients:

3 cups unbleached flour

1 Tbsp. baking powder

1 Tsp. salt

1 1/2 cups "warm" water

Preparation:

- ! Mix the flour, salt, and baking powder together in a bowl. Sift or stir this together.
- ! Add the "warm" water to this mixture and stir until all the dry ingredients are mixed well.
- ! Put oil on your hands; remove dough from bowl and knead until the dough is smooth.
- ! When the dough is smooth & soft, rub oil over the top of your dough.
- ! Place back into the bowl, cover with a dry cloth & let rest for 30 minutes.
- ! Begin heating your lard, oil, or grease so it is very hot.
- ! Pull the dough at its edges until you have small circles.
- ! Drop circles into the hot grease until golden brown, then turn over until golden brown on the other side as well.
- ! Add enough grease/oil so the dough can deep fry.
- ! Dip cooked fry bread into sugar, or spread butter, jam or jelly on top and eat.

4. There are also a wide variety of cookbooks available at bookstores and through online retailers. Here are a few examples:

*American Indian Cooking: Recipes from the Southwest* (Carolyn J. Niethammer)

*Flora's Kitchen: Recipes from a New Mexico Family* (Regina Romero)

*Native American Gardening: Stories, Projects and Recipes for Families* (Michael J. Caduto, et al.)

*Native Indian Wild Game, Fish & Wild Foods Cookbook: Recipes from North American Native Cooks* (David Hunt)

5. There are many powwows scheduled throughout the year in different regions of the United States. Employees may enjoy attending a local event; check your local listings or search the Internet for powwow schedules. For example, the following web site lists powwows scheduled in Illinois this year: <http://www2.famvid.com/dmeuths/west.html>. Or, national powwow schedules can be found at <http://www.nativeculture.com/lisamitten/powwows.html>. Tapes and CDs featuring traditional powwow music are available through Earth Circles Minnesota ([www.earthcirclesminnesota.com](http://www.earthcirclesminnesota.com)).

6. To learn more about the origins of lacrosse, see *American Indian Lacrosse--Little Brother of War* (Thomas Vennum, Jr.) and the Native American Lacrosse web site (<http://www.e-lacrosse.com/na.htm>).

7. This chapter discussed lacrosse as a Native American sport; however, there are many other games that either originated with or were popular with Native Americans. *Handbook of American Indian Games* (Allan and Paulette Macfarlan) discusses 150 popular games, many of which are suitable for recreational groups of all types. Games include running and relay games, skill games, group challenges, ceremonial games, and others.

8. Cat's Cradle (web weaving) is an example of a popular game that is discussed in the *Handbook of American Indian Games*. Cat's cradle strings and books are available in variety, game, dollar, and bookstores. Employees may enjoy a display related to Native American games.

## 9. Native American Language Challenge

Try your hand at matching the following states to the correct derivation.

- |                         |          |  |
|-------------------------|----------|--|
| A. Arizona              | 1. ____  | From a Navajo word meaning upper or higher up  |
| B. Connecticut          | 2. ____  | Algonquin word meaning men or warriors   |
| C. Illinois             | 3. ____  | Sioux word for “south wind people”   |
| D. Indiana              | 4. ____  | Sioux for friend or ally   |
| E. Kansas               | 5. ____  | From the name for Cherokee villages on one of this state’s rivers                                |
| F. Michigan             | 6. ____  | Spanish version of Pima Indian word for “little spring place” or Aztec for “silver-bearing”      |
| G. Missouri             | 7. ____  | Means “land of the Indians”  |
| H. North & South Dakota | 8. ____  | From Chippewa words meaning “great water”  |
| I. Tennessee            | 9. ____  | Russian version of Aleutian word for “peninsula,” “great lands,” or “land that is not an island” |
| J. Utah                 | 10. ____ | An Algonquin term meaning “river of the big canoes”  |
| K. Wisconsin            | 11. ____ | From Mohican and other Algonquin words meaning “long river place”                                |
| L. Alaska               | 12. ____ | Believed to mean “grassy place” in Chippewa  |

## Answer Key

1. J 2. C 3. E 4. H 5. I 6. A 7. D 8. F 9. L 10. G 11. B 12. K