Native American History & Ramifications of European and American Colonization and Relations

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AMH2010

July 27, 2017

In order to have a full understanding of the ramifications of Native American and European relations and interactions, one must grasp the differences and similarities in the ideologies and mindsets of these groups. One of the most apparent differences is the attitude of property ownership[[1]](#footnote-0). For Europeans, they had a more capitalist and private ownership mindset. Europeans traditionally bought and sold land for profit as a way of life and a culture. Inversely, Native American tribes generally had a more communal approach to land ownership. Native American chiefs often gave land to tribe members and the land was more communal than private. Aside from views of the role of land, Native Americans and Europeans also had different views on gender roles and societal hierarchies[[2]](#footnote-1). Europeans often had a strict social hierarchy with the poorest at the bottom and richest at the top, with royalty generally being the highest tier of the hierarchy. Native Americans shared their wealth among their tribe and there generally was not any Native American royalty. As for gender roles, Europeans had strict gender roles on top of their social hierarchy. European women were widely restricted from almost every aspect of the economy, society, and politics. For Native Americans, women were more equal, though not completely equal, than their European counterparts. For example, women were sometimes given jobs other than being just the mother figure. Sometimes they were given farming jobs or other manual jobs. Native American men were seen as weak by Europeans because they gave their women too much power. These cultural dichotomies enable Europeans to portray Native Americans as savages and inferior. One of the only similarities is presence of an established religion[[3]](#footnote-2). Both Native Americans and Europeans had established religions, for Europeans they differed among nations and for Native Americans they differed between tribes. While some Native Americans had more dogmatic religious systems, such as the Aztec and Inca having human sacrifice, they were still established religions.

American history has a short yet diverse history filled with horrific events. Until the late twentieth century, western relations and attitudes toward the indigenous populations of the Americas have been responsible for numerous events ranging from horrific to helpful. While a large portion of these events were abhorrent, the French and Dutch were relatively friendlier with local Native American tribes as opposed to the English and Spanish. The dichotomy in relations stems from the motives that these nations held. The French and Dutch were primarily there for trading whereas the English arrived to spread Christianity, specifically Protestantism, and the Spanish were there to conquer. This is what is presently known as the three G’s: God, Gold, and Glory. While there is an element of all three G’s in each nation’s motive, there is no doubt these nations had a primary goal in mind. These motives would induce varied relations between the nations and natives, such as the Huron and Iroquois having relatively decent relations with the French1 and the Pueblo and Zuni having rebellion attitudes toward the Spanish.

Native American relations with the French began with the intentions of trading. French fishermen in modern-day southeastern Canada along the St. Lawrence river set up trade relations with the Huron and Iroquois[[4]](#footnote-3). French would eventually begin trading and setup trade routes with the Huron which would include the Inuit and Cree tribes[[5]](#footnote-4). Trade relations among nations and groups of people tend to increase goodwill amongst each other and the relation between the French and the Native Americans show that. For instance, the Iroquois would eventually tell the French of a kingdom of people they believed to be enriched with golds and silvers[[6]](#footnote-5), today this is believed to be the Spanish. The French continued to trade with the Native Americans throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century and began to establish trade with more tribes, such as a group of Canadian Micmac Native Americans. As time went on, the French continued to construct more trading posts and in 1608, the Iroquois nation would allow Champlain and the French to build a trading post on an older Iroquois village by the name of Stadacona[[7]](#footnote-6). This trading post would become what is modern day Quebec. Another trading post built on the village named Hochelaga would eventually become Montreal. The French methods of interacting with Native Americans differed significantly from the English and Spanish methods. The French method was based upon trade, trading post, and mercantile and having their Christian missionaries be attached to specific allied Native American villages. The English had no interest in setting up permanent trade with Natives and had their missionaries attached to their colonies[[8]](#footnote-7). Along modern day British Columbia, maritime trade was common. European merchants and traders viewed the fur trade in British Columbia as an opportunity to exploit Native Americans.[[9]](#footnote-8) A man by the name of Stanley Ryerson claimed that the fur trade along the coast of British Columbia “depended on ruthless exploitation of Indian labor…backed whenever necessary by force or open threats of force.” H.H. Bancroft also claimed that Captain James Cook was buying the furs from the “guileless savage,” and F.W. Howay claimed that is was “merely a looting of the coast.”

The English had a different approach to establishing relations with the Native American populations. The English saw themselves, openly at least, as superior to the indigenous populations. One instance of this attitude is displayed in interactions between the early Jamestown colony in 1607 and Chief Wahunsonacock (Powhatan). The Powhatan confederacy had given gifts to the colony as to not let them starve and die. However, the colony viewed these gifts as tribute to them[[10]](#footnote-9). This would become a problem in the following year when John Smith returned to the confederacy for a yearly tribute of corn and Powhatan saw it as an opportunity for metal, weapons, and other goods. Instead of establishing trade, John Smith took the corn by force[[11]](#footnote-10). English colonists would continue to keep the attitude superiority towards Native Americans all the way through the twenty first century. Years later, Powhatan taught the English to grow and harvest tobacco[[12]](#footnote-11), a crop that would become a major cash crop in the coming decades and would further expand the slave trade and slavery in the colonies. The English would continue to have little respect for the Native Americans as shown when the English kidnap Pocahontas in 1613[[13]](#footnote-12) and continue to colonize Massachusetts Bay[[14]](#footnote-13), both of which would further escalate conflicts between the groups. English colonists also had another goal, but this was a more general goal of the colonies and the empire. The English looked to convert other peoples to their religion. For example, in 1619 the English colony of Jamestown in Virginia created a school for Native Americans so that they can convert the children to Christianity[[15]](#footnote-14).

The Spanish took a more aggressive approach to the Americas. One of the first actions the Spanish took after Christopher Columbus’ expedition was to send Hernan Cortez and Francisco Pizzaro to secure the Americas for Spain. Respectively, the two conquistadores began a conquest on the Aztec empire and the Incan empire.[[16]](#footnote-15) Spain primarily searched for gold and silver to enrich Spain through wealth and money. After the conquest of the Aztecs and Incas, the Spanish sent several ships to and from the Americas filled with gold and silver.[[17]](#footnote-16) This and conquest for gold was a success in the end as it made Spain the wealthiest nation in Europe.[[18]](#footnote-17) After the exploitation of gold and silver by the Spanish, they transferred to the encomienda system where the Spanish gave Spaniards individual grants of land as well as Native American slaves. The Native Americans from the Aztec and Incan empires worked mines as well as farmland.[[19]](#footnote-18) The Spanish conquered one of the largest land masses, however the colonies themselves grew rather slow because of resource limitations and Native American conflict. The main Spanish colonies include Florida, New Mexico, Texas, and California. Spanish conquistadores killed millions of Native Americans over the course of a few years as a result of warfare, disease, and enslavement.[[20]](#footnote-19) Around 1539, the Spanish would enter Pueblo territory after a failed settlement effort in Florida around 1528.[[21]](#footnote-20) However, after years of oppression, in 1680, Pueblo religious leadership banished Spaniards because the Spanish were attempting to force Pueblos into Spanish religious and economic slavery.[[22]](#footnote-21)

Native Americans were, in general, unfit and unable to sustain prolonged war due to a lack of resources unlike their European counterparts and if they did not have a European ally, tribes would quickly be defeated by means of attrition. Native American warfare was vastly different from European traditions. Native Americans chose leaders based on merit and experience whereas Europeans chose their leaders based on privilege.[[23]](#footnote-22) Native American ideals of military discipline differed to European views. Native American discipline was based upon honor and personal valor as opposed to punishment.[[24]](#footnote-23) Conflict between Native Americans and Europeans was frequent and often detrimental to the indigenous populations. There are a number of examples of conflict between settlers and colonists, including the Powhatan Wars where the Powhatan tribe slaughtered around 350 Virginians in the year 1622. Soon after in 1644, the Powhatan tribe once again attacked the Virginians.[[25]](#footnote-24) The Pequot Massacre is another example of conflict between Native Americans and settlers. The Pequot Massacre occurred in the year 1637 and was completed by a British Captain by the name of John Mason and other allied Native Americans. Captain Mason went to a Pequot tribe village and set fire to the buildings, killing anywhere from 600-700 inhabitants.[[26]](#footnote-25) In addition to the Powhatan Wars and Pequot Massacre, there was an additional conflict known as King Phillip’s War. King Phillip’s war occurred during the years 1675-76 and took place in New England. The Wampanoag chief Metacom was named King Philip by the British. Metacom marched into British settlements and towns in a war waged against the British rule. The war ended up costing around 600 British lives and around 3,000 Native American lives.[[27]](#footnote-26) The Pueblo Revolt is another instance of Native American resistance to European rule. In the year 1680, the Pueblo would revolt against the Spanish and expel them for 12 years. Many Pueblo died during the rebellion but the resistance never broke and around 2,000 Spanish refugees left the city of Santa Fe in August.[[28]](#footnote-27) Later, when colonies were well established and were essentially miniature nations in possession of their respective “mother countries,” the French and English colonies were brought into a war that France and England were fighting. This war became known as the French and Indian War. This war was a part of a larger conflict known as the Seven Years War and could be accurately conflated to be the true First World War. French and many Native American tribes that were allied to French colonies joined forces in the war in America against the British and American colonies alliance.[[29]](#footnote-28) Into the 1800s, tensions between the Americans and Native Americans continued to worsen. After the war of 1812 and the Treaty of Ghent was signed, President James Madison, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Jackson all argued that since the Creeks had made peace prior to the treaty, their land should not be restored but rather remain a ceded part of the United States.[[30]](#footnote-29)

In conclusion, Native American relations with European and American settlers have resulted in numerous tragedies but as also, early on, resulted in some technological advancements for some Native American tribes as well as economic stimulation for both sides. However, political ramifications mostly benefitted the European side whereas the politics of not only manifest destiny helped eradicate entire civilizations, but also the European sense of superiority and self-righteousness. Native Americans and Europeans, in general, were at war for centuries, starting with Spanish conquistadores in the early sixteenth century and going all the way through to the 2nd Seminole War in the 1800s. Economically, the French benefitted from Native American trade and vice versa by trading furs for European goods. The English sought to enrich the Empire and to spread the ideas of Christianity. The Spanish desired conquest and wealth. The want for wealth, spread of religion, and the conquering of opponents is a key aspect in learning and teaching Native American and European relations and history. As they play a vital role in the rationale and desires for the actions these groups take.

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2. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Judith Nies*, Native American History: A Chronology of a Culture’s Vast Achievements and their Links to World Events* (New York City & Toronto: Ballantine Books, 1996), page 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977) page 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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26. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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