

The Early American Inhabitants
(Origins and Socio- Cultural Tradition)

Lecturer : Muyassr Qasim. Alkhashab

Department of English Language

Al-Noor University College/ Iraq

- Abstract -

Many questions are raised of who are the first early inhabitants of America before its discovery by Chr. Columbus(1451-1506),and where do their tribes come from? They are certainly people who have their own social and cultural features.

This approach sheds light historically on the nature of discovering America itself in 1492, and on the important theories of the Red-Indians' origin, besides their socio- cultural, and religious tradition so long as part of them still live in America.

The Objective: is to investigate the theories which are concerned with their origins, and to know their cultural and social tradition as well .

Key words: American natives, Chr. Columbus, tribes, the cultural and social tradition.

سكان اميركا الأصليون (الاصول والتراث الثقافي الاجتماعي)

مدرس ميسر قاسم الخشاب

قسم اللغة الانكليزية كلية النور الجامعة/ العراق

- ملخص -

أسئلة كثيرة تثار حول سكان أميركا الأصليين قبل اكتشاف القارة الأميركية . فهم بالتأكيد أناس يمتلكون خصائص اجتماعية وثقافية .. اذن ، من أين جاءت هذه القبائل ؟ كما يلقي البحث الضوء تاريخيا على طبيعة اكتشاف أميركا من قبل كريستوفر كولومبس عام 1492م، وعلى أهم النظريات المطروحة حول أصولهم، إضافة الى موروثهم الثقافي الاجتماعي والديني علما ان كثيرا منهم مازال يعيش هناك لحد الآن. هدف البحث هو الاستقصاء والبحث في نظريات واصول سكان اميركا الأصليين وتراثهم الاجتماعي الثقافي . الكلمات الدالة - اكتشاف أميركا، كريستوفر كولومبس، قبائلهم، موروث الهنود الاجتماعي والثقافي والديني .

1 - Introduction

In 1453 Constantinople fell and the Turkish pressure upon Europe was clear and continuous. Its fall did much to interrupt trade with the East where merchants and sailors, all over Europe, were looking for new ways to the East in the fifteenth century, In 1486, the Portuguese Bartolommeo Diaz reports that he has rounded South of Africa, and the way opens then for Vasco De Gama. Eleven years later, they were already working their way to the east before the Spanish.¹

Columbus knows that the world is a sphere and the travels of Marco Polo have given him an exaggerated idea of the extent of Asia. After he convinces King Ferdinand of Spain and his wife Isabella, he sets sail for exploration when he combines facts and rumors from Arabs, Portuguese, and ancient Greece.

In 1492, Columbus got his ships – three ships, of which only one the Santa Maria, of 100 tons burthen was decked. After a voyage of two months and nine days, the crews were full of doubts and fear until they were comforted by seeing some birds, and later on, by finding a pole worked with tools. At ten o'clock, on the night of October 11th, 1492 Columbus saw light a head.

Land is sighted and Columbus lands on the shores of the new world with the royal banner of Spain. Therefore, the Islands which he found were called the West Indies. Believing the earth to be a globe, Columbus expects to find India or Eastern Asia by sailing westward from Spain. The first land discovered by him was rather known as Bahamas islands; Cuba and Haiti. In his book Out Line of History, H. G. Wells says that " the only people encountered by the Spaniards were savages of a Mongoloid type. Many of these savages were cannibals." ²

Columbus returns to Europe with gold, cotton, beasts and two-eyed painted Indians to be baptized in 1493. At first, the Indians were enslaved with much brutality and injustice. Indeed the first Europeans to reach America were rather incurious Spaniards without any scientific passion, thirsty for gold and full of blind bigotry of a recent religious war. They slaughtered and actually " they robbed, enslaved and baptized the Indians." ³ .

The new rich world (America) was inhabited by people long many hundreds of years ago. It was not known for the Europeans till the 16th century. Various scientists and philosophers wonder about the social development of human kind outside the structure of the so-called civilized society. Again the letter of Columbus who was at sea describes the New World as 'a wondrous place' and offers to Europeans riches and fulfillment of a dazzling dream. ⁴

2- The Indians' Names, Origins and Languages:

The first inhabitants who lived in America before the arrival of Christopher Columbus (1451 – 1506) were usually called: the indigenous people, the Red-Indians or American Natives. The Indians were certainly those original people of America who settled once in that continent, the northern, the middle and the southern parts together with other ethnic groups.

Today, the correct political term which is mostly used is 'Native Americans' though some historical documentations use the word "Indian" as a standard. If there is an obscurity in the Indian names or a little confusion, many predominating traits unite them in origin, language and culture before and after their contact with the Europeans.

In dealing with these original Americans, one can find more than two hypotheses of these people in various parts of America:

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The **first** prominent view favors the theory which says that the Indians have come from Asiatic families. The more northern tribes of this continent have come from Mongols across Bering Strait. The migration could have taken place between 9000 to 5000 years ago .⁵

The **second** suggestion says that the southern tribes in America have come from the darker Malays across the Pacific Ocean, and then they settled in California, central and South America. Indeed scholars actually estimate the total populations of Americans before the European contact from a low of (10) million to a high of (112) million. Others, **third**, believe that most of the indigenous population resided in Mesoamerica and South America with approximately (10) percent residing in North America before the European colonization.⁶

Culturally, the Indians were the most advanced of the tribes in the hot desert country of the southwest. They grew corn, squash, bean crops and they built intricate multi – storied dwellings. The **Navajo** and **Apache** tribes arrived from the north shortly before the Spanish explorers. The two tribes settled there around 1500 A.D., or a little earlier. The Navajo and Apache were called Apaches and started together to come from the north where they lived in the northwestern Canada and Alaska about 2000 years ago.

The Indians of the east actually lived on farming. A culture of mound builders arose in the Mississippi Valley about 2000 years ago whereas the Eastern Wood culture was destroyed about 1800 B.C.

The exact date and the routes of their coming still remains a matter of debate. Large groups of people with similar language and physical characteristics settled in different areas of north, central and South America. The route via canoes could have clearly allowed rapid migration into America before those associated with the **Bering Strait** migration. These early immigrants would have either crossed the ocean

by boat or travelled north along the Asian coast and entered America through the north west even before the Siberian waves started to arrive.⁷

The Indians seem to have a physical identity of race. Such people had reddish – brown skin in colour, with long straight black hair and deep – set eyes. Their lips were full rounded with prominent noses which strikingly refer to Tartar Origin. Over time, the inhabitants of North America spread out into as many as 240 tribal groups who lived in similar environment. They may have spoken different languages but they developed similar ways of life. They manufactured war tools, mats, feather clothing, canoes and claws of beasts. Art of design picture – writing and literature were developed. Their language had the richness and sententious fullness of the Chinese.

In fact, their languages show no attempt to unite them. The Indians' tradition and their modes of life form a strong relationship among them. More than (300) languages were spoken in North America and North of Mexico before the arrival of Columbus whereas less than (170) are only spoken today. But most of these languages had either been disappeared from the society or mixed with other languages.⁸

Anyhow, remnants of a human settlement in Monte Verde suggest that southern Chile was settled by peoples who entered America before the peoples associated with the Bering Strait migrations. Their language was varied by more than a hundred dialects, which were divided into many families or tribes under a type of patriarchal rule. Each family had its armorial sign called a **totem** such as an eagle, a bear, or a deer by which it was designated. Such people were well known for their hospitality and bravery. In wars, they were cruel towards their enemies and were at the same time faithful towards their friends and:⁹

” who has ever found a Huron asleep? (p.242)

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They have actually no diversity of appearance, manners or languages as Christopher Columbus described them.

3 - Distribution of the Indian Nation:

The Indian people, who lived in north America, seem to have been mainly eight distinct nations known to the early settlers: **Huron, Iroquois, the Algonquian, Cherokee, Catawba, Unche, Natchez, Dakota or Sioux** with other nations such as **Chinooks** and **Attakapas**. Among other developed famous tribes were **the Aztec** who mainly lived in Mexico and **the Inca and Maya** in south America (**Peru**).¹⁰

The Algonquian was a large family lived in all Canada, New England, a part of New York and Pennsylvania whereas the Delaware lived in Maryland and Virginia besides all north and west of those States east of Mississippi. The Huron – Iroquois were occupying a greater portion of Canada, south of the Ottawa River and the region between Lake Ontario and Lakes Erie and Huron, while the Tuscarora and other small families dwelled in southern Virginia and the upper part of North Carolina.

Other famous families of the Huron – Iroquois were 'the Iroquois Confederacy of Five Nations', inhabited within the limits of New York such as the Natchez and the Modillions. In Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada, animals that could be hunted were scarce, and their shelters were simple huts covered with rushes of bunches of grass, but the Mohican tribes were among the first people to disappear. This tribe consisted of (5) major divisions governed by hereditary sachems (chiefs) assisted by elected counselors. They inhabited mostly in northern Wisconsin and they lived in strong holds of 20 – 30 houses situated on hills or woodlands. They were forced many times to change their places.¹¹

The Navajo people were also those people who migrated to American southwest. They learned farming and weaving from Pueblo peoples, and learned certain skills from the Spanish like: livestock and silver-working. They are today the most populous American Nation in the United States. Ceremonies constitute some of their basic cultural life including chants. ¹²

4 - Indian social and cultural organization: -

Like any old nation , the Indian culture is well – known in different places of America especially the Eastern Woodlands. They compromise the vast wilderness east of Mississippi River, reaching from the St. Lawrence River Valley in Canada, southward all the way to the Gulf of Mexico . In the Mississippi culture (700 -1700 A.D.), the principal source of food was plants. This period was rather called the 'Temple Mound 'because people built large earth mounds similar to the pyramids in ancient Egypt. East of Mississippi River, monuments in the form of earth mounds were left by several ancient cultures.

Many other works of art include stone statues of humans decorate pottery vessels with various engravings on shell, copper or stone .These pottery works, which contained plant fibers, were invented or derived from middle or South America .Various cord impressed works of pottery from the southwest might have come from Asia. ¹³

During the grown season, people usually load corn, beans, tobacco and a few sunflowers on the horses, and their women work nearly all the manual labor and burden – bearing, and they also help their men in limited agriculture. Women plant corn, pumpkin and tobacco. They make clothing from skins of deer and other animals. Men and women wear robes of buffalo fur in cold weather. In this field, men used to wear semi tailored shirts, with half –lengthy sleeves whereas women wear a

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full – lengthy dress with half – lengthy sleeves. The Indian's clothes were rather different from that of the African and they are oriental in it. ¹⁴

Most of them have in social organization council of men and a chief. The tribal area reveals a developed aspect of social life where some tribes have two chiefs: 'a civil chief ' in charge affairs within the tribes, and 'a war chief' in charge of war parties against enemies. Every decision of importance ends with the consent of a council of mature men particularly in cases of peace and war:

The Delaware have been like bears after the honey-pots, prowling around a village. But "who has ever found a Huron asleep?" (p. 242)

The Indians had generally their own tradition in building their simple houses. In clothing they all vary from place to place and from tribe to tribe as well . ¹⁵

5- The Red- Indians' religious and mythological tradition: -

In connection with the social organization, the religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous peoples appear clearly to show that **spirit** moves through all things, animate and inanimate, and that the living are intimately connected with the souls of the dead. They also believed in a good and Supreme Being as well as Evil spirits. Moreover, they discovered recognizable beings in the natural world of animals, plants, mountains, lakes and clouds. All power and goodness can be in heaven. ¹⁶

In addition to that, Indians are involved in superstition and incarnation besides their faith in future state of existence. The Iroquois elders for example speak a perfectly wise and good Creator who plans the Universe. Stories of the beginning of the World which are presented by Native Americans although never written down or gathered into a Bible as the Book of Genesis.

All native peoples have stories of the earliest times. The most well-known stories are three; one from the Iroquois of the Northeast and the other two are from the Akimel Oodham or Pima of the Southwest.

The **Pima story of Creation** tells that there was no earth, and no water. There was only a 'Person Juh-wert-a-kai' (The Doctor of the Earth) who wandered around in the nowhere till he thought he had wandered enough. He rubbed on his breast and rubbed out-moah-haht-tack, that is perspiration, or greasy earth. Then, he rubbed out on the palm of his hand and held out. It tipped three times, but the fourth time it staid straight in the middle of the air and there it remains now as the world :

- Juhwertamahkai's Song of Creation-

Juhwer tamahkai made the world-

Come and see it and make it useful

He made it round-

Come and see it and make it useful

(T.A.Literature,p.25)

According to H. G. Wells: "the Aztec were civilized people and their religion was primitive, complex and cruel system. Their minds were haunted by the idea of sin and the need for propitiations.¹⁷

Their contact with the Europeans led to development of new religious movements including the Native American Church. Ceremonies, for example, represent a central part of Navajo culture. They used to enhance life -to promote a successful hunt and good crops- to cure physical illness and to remedy misfortunes of all kinds, a fire or miscarriage. One of the most elaborate Navajo ceremonies is the 'The Night chant' which has its own conventional order:

It begins notably at sunset and ends at sunrise after nine days of particular series of songs, dances, and chanted prayers. In this case, a

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patient seats himself west of a fire that has been kindled for the ceremony.

There is another interesting and meaningful example in the Sioux tradition which is called 'vision quest '.The purpose is to teach their sons and children values of courage. They prepare them to go to the forest to seek for this 'vision'. In order to be purified in a far hot stream, they stay alone four days to wait for their future and then come back as brave young men .¹⁸

Moreover, in kenyon envision, the creator as Raven, a trickster god is only one of many powerful spirits. In the north, all Native American religions share the following points:

- 1- The ancestral lands and locally sacred spots are so much recognized semblance.
- 2- The oral tradition includes their stories which record human interaction with non-human powers.
- 3- Generosity represents for them a religious act.

There are some other Indian songs which belong to Chippewa that represent an interesting tradition of music. The Chippewa, one of the largest Indian groups in North America, gather into villages where they fish and plant small gardens. Their songs are usually short and quite with few words and brief melodies .Let's read one of their short beautiful songs below:

- Songs of crows -

The first to come

Among the birds

I bring the rain

Crow is my name. (T. A. Literature, p.965)

This song is directed to a young man who was fasting. As crows, the first to return to Chippewa land, they are thought to bring the spring rains. ¹⁹

Another Indian song is: -

The Approach of the Storm

From the half of the sky

That which lives there

Is coming, and makes noise. (T.N.Anthology A.L.,P.21)

They understood thunder as a Manido or spirit of the storm. It makes its noise to warn people that severe weather is on the way. According to scholars , the Chippewa would put tobacco on the fire offering the smoke to the Manido in gratitude for the warning .Therefore they find their ways through certain stars :

" For many hours ,the travelers toiled on the laborious way ,guided by a star ,or following the direction of some water-course" .(p.20)

The Indian tradition also includes the Indians' stories, tales, and legends. Like most American Indian tribes, the Winnebago divides the prose narratives into two types: those that deals with a past that is irretrievably gone, and which belongs to the realm of things no longer possible or attainable by man or spirits, and those which deals with the present workaday world . The first is called waikan, what is sacred, and the second worak ,what is recounted. The heroes of the waikan were either spirits and deities like Thunderbird, Water spirit, Sun, Morning Star, or vague semi deities like Trickster, He-who-wears-human-heads-as-ear-pendants (also called Red Horn) and Bladder, or animals like Hare, Turtle, Bear, Wolf. These animals were, however, really regarded as spirits. The Winnebago made a clear distinction, at least the Winnebago 'theologians' did, between the animal-deity who presided over all the animals of a given species and the concrete animals themselves. It is those presiding animal-deities who appear in the waikan. Certain animals

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belong to a special category, for instance, Hare, Turtle and possibly Bear, for there is some reason for believing that the first two at least were once deities who have secondarily lost their primary divine traits.

Finally, most indigenous people, regardless of the Indians' origin or race, have acquired their modern life style. Many of them also practice their cultural activities including religion, social organization and other subsistence practices, whereas some other indigenous peoples are still living in relative isolation from western society. According to Christopher Columbus”, the Indians are not stupid and indolent but acute and sagacious” 20

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the New World is a wondrous place .The inhabitants possess no iron and they neither use , nor acquainted with weapons. The inhabitants of both sexes in Espanola go naked as they were born ,all except a few females

who wear at the waist a green leaf .They exhibit a great friendship towards anyone ,and will give whatever they have for a trifle or nothing at all .There is no diversity of appearance of the people...

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