

Cultural Conflict during European Contact

Adapted from *A History of the Canadian Peoples, 3rd Edition*

- Europeans assumed that they were superior over the Indigenous populations. Over time, most Europeans began to see Indigenous Peoples as savage.
 - Contrast: At this time Europeans still ate with their hands, seldom bathed and enjoyed such entertainments as bear-baiting (dogs pitted against captive bears in fights to the death) and pitting the blind against each other in battle. Garbage and animal excrement were piled high in the streets of European cities.
- Whatever technological advantage the Europeans had over the Indigenous Peoples (many argue there was none) the environment of North and South America rendered them redundant (useless). Successful Europeans had to adopt Indigenous technologies in order to survive in North America.
- First encounters were largely conducted using hand gestures and body language which is problematic:
 - Hugging, kissing, and touching various body parts carry different connotations in different cultural groups.
- Dealing with completely different languages was very complicated. Concrete objects (knife, rock and tree) could be learned through pointing, but abstract ideas (love, family, friendship, weather) were much more difficult. Gradually, pidgin languages developed (a hybrid of two or more different languages). Example: During the fur trade a pidgin language developed that merged French, Gaelic, English, Cree and Assiniboine.
- Indigenous economies did not produce political institutions on a European scale. Because of their constant movement, Indigenous Peoples rarely went beyond the “band” which was composed of a few families.
- Political structures was not as complex as Europeans were used to. **Chiefs were not kings** – they may not even have been ‘head men’ in any European sense.



- Indigenous Peoples practiced war according to different rules than those employed in Europe, where institutions of church and state went to war for ‘reasons of state.’ Indigenous wars were mainly raids by a few warriors, conducted partly because success in battle was an important test of manhood.
 - Indigenous Peoples, with their own agendas, were not reliable allies for the Europeans.
 - The Haudenosaunee Confederacy was an exception to the above notion.
- Nowhere was the gulf between Indigenous Peoples and Europeans greater than in the spiritual realm. Indigenous worldviews were complex, and tied intimately with the environment. The world was endowed with spiritual significance.
- Formal religious ceremonies were not readily apparent to Europeans, except for the activities of shamans – **shamans were no more priests than other leaders were kings**, but Europeans tended to consider their activities to be at the core of “Indigenous religions.”
- Europeans found it impossible to grasp that inanimate objects in nature could be alive and have their own powers, or that rituals connected with the ordinary round of daily life could have spiritual significance.
- That Indigenous Peoples had no permanent buildings, no clerical hierarchy, and no visible (to non-Indigenous Peoples) institutional presence thoroughly disoriented the Europeans. Even though Europeans were undergoing a religious crisis (Catholic verses Protestant) they agreed that Indigenous worldviews were evil and needed to be eliminated. That Europeans could not agree on what form of Christianity was right confused Indigenous Peoples (who encountered both Catholics – French, Spanish, Portuguese – and Protestants – Dutch, English, Swedish).

From the beginning, many Europeans developed two responses to Indigenous Peoples:

1. First Nations were admirable and exhibited none of the negative features of capitalistic society.
2. First Peoples were savage and barbarian.

In both cases, Europeans were trying to define Indigenous Peoples using a European cultural lens – something that ensured that their understanding of Indigenous culture would prove impossible.

