

Question 4

The Native American and European cultures clashed. Discuss why.

THESIS: In light of the fact that the tradition of European city squares were not imperial architectural designs, the colonists pre-judged the Iroquois, claiming with insolence and disdain that they had a primitive social network.

Accompanying this state of thought, the Europeans thought them to be a backwards people, where an absence of a traditional judiciary, as well as a matriarchal system, constituted Iroquoian culture.

Considering much historical evidence, however, the designs of their villages allowed for greater social connectivity and safety while the men were away on extended expeditions, subsequently proving to the Europeans that the Iroquoian social structure was far more advanced than originally perceived to be.

PROOF: Since the Europeans who settled North America were unused to cultures other than European ones, it was a great shock to them when they found these haphazardly planned villages in meadows. With no central square and very few public structures, what kind of people must these be, thought the Europeans. This mindset of “*let’s show these people the right way to do things*” was a very common characteristic of European expansionist policy. However, rarely, if ever, did they actually take the time to learn about the civilizations and how they functioned.

Take Iroquoian village formations. 99% of the structures in any given village were longhouses, even the council house, which served all of the inhabitants of the village, and is equivalent to the modern-day city hall or chamber of commerce. The Iroquois did this for different reasons.

One was semi-permanent housing. Due to the fact that the Iroquois were land cultivators, this required them to leave their residences for a few months out of the year. With fewer structures to guard against pillagers, the Iroquois were able to travel further, for a longer period of time, and with more people.

Also, it was a form of socialization. Because several families lived in the same structure, they naturally bonded. Entire families (mothers, fathers, children, other relatives) were cramped into tiny compartments, with two bunks 6ftX12ft. Because of this arrangement, instead of just

caring for their family and ignoring their neighbors, they were helpless but to care for the entire household.

However, due in part to English influence, as well as natural cultural fluxes, the longhouses were gradually abandoned for single family log cabins. This phenomenon proved to be detrimental to Iroquois identity and society.

The absence of a traditional judiciary was also foreign, and in all honesty, repulsive, to the Europeans, who signified a culture without a judiciary to exist as nothing more than a group of people living among each other.

Once again, imperial arrogance tongued its way to the depths of the colonists' collective psyche, as they failed to realize that the Iroquois had a very powerful judiciary, just not what the English had in mind. Iroquoian justice was in the form of oral tradition, or what we in the modern world call gossip. For example: if a man killed a cow to feed his starving family, while other men were out fighting in wars, he would be labeled "Cow-killer", a name which would walk with him for the rest of his life. People would talk about him behind his back and whisper as he walked by. They would tell the white men the story of the coward who killed a cow, while other men were fighting, all while the "Cow-killer" was standing there. For it is the way they attacked the perpetrator. They drove straight to the heart of the problem: the *weakness* of the individual, which in essence would drive a figurative stake through the man's heart.

The existence of fear, duty, and the dreaded possibility of witchcraft kept most wrongdoers at bay. This proved in the fact that robbery, vandalism, rape, etc., were nearly nonexistent in Iroquoian culture until the arrival of the Europeans.

Considering this, however, the Iroquois were only human, and humans make mistakes. Murders did occur, albeit a rarity. The murderer, though, was not arrested. He wasn't prosecuted. His fate was left to the decision of the victim's family. Usually, the accused would come to his senses, repent, and pay retribution to the victim's family, although if the sin was egregious enough, he would pay retribution to the entire village as well. If the victim's family felt that death was a suitable punishment, they were allowed to proceed in their own way without fear of prosecution or vendetta.

All of these things considered, nothing appeared more backwards to the English than the matriarchal system that was Iroquoian society. The reasons for this are many, however, the most important being the expeditions the men, as hunters, warriors, and diplomats, embarked upon, which would keep them away for months, even years, at a time.

Women had three principal duties in the political forum.

1. Whenever one of the forty-nine chiefs of the great League of the Iroquois died, the senior women from his lineage nominated a successor to take his place.
2. In town hall meetings (the best way to describe them) the men most commonly spoke and were the diplomats, while the women caucused behind the scenes and lobbied the spokesmen.
3. When one of the men from the lineage line was killed, the senior woman had the right to ask that a non-Iroquois captive be put in his place. As her relatives, the men had a moral obligation to form a war party and embark on a mission to find a replacement. If the woman did not like the replacement, she could order to have him released, tortured, tortured and killed, or simply killed.

While the men played the role of the hunters in the food aspect, the women were the cultivators and agriculturalists. They planted and hoed entire fields of corn, which would go not to them or their families, but to the entire village, considering that land did not belong to an individual, family, or town, but to the entire Iroquois nation.

All of these factors were central to the development and succession of Native American culture. Because of the structures of the Iroquoian longhouses, they were able to bond and protect each other from invaders, i.e. the English. The absence of courts and police provided a greater respect for their fellow neighbors, and the matriarchy allowed women to prove themselves worthy of leadership positions. All of these were tied into the social aspect of Iroquois culture, an aspect the English, unfortunately, failed to realize.