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An Affluent Anomaly: The Cultures and Economies of the Pre-Columbian Northwest

Jacob Grandstaff

The Indians that lived in what is today the northwestern United States represent three distinct cultures based on their geography. The arid, mountainous region of present-day Utah, Nevada, and southern Wyoming make up what archeologists refer to as the Great Basin. The tribes to the north in western Montana, Idaho, eastern Oregon, and eastern Washington are recognized as the Plateau culture. And those who lived along the Pacific coast from northern California to southeastern Alaska are referred to as the Northwest Coast culture. These regions were marked by drastic contrasts in lifestyle and wealth. Most of these differences were primarily the result of culture, but physical geography played a role in shaping each culture. According to Gallup, Sachs, and Mellinger, location and climate have large effects on income growth, through their effects on transportation costs, disease, and agricultural productivity, among other reasons.¹ It is the purpose of this paper to focus on the Northwest Pacific Coast and the

¹. John Luke Gallup, Jeffrey Sachs, with Andrew Mellinger, "Geography and Economic Development," Center for International Development at Harvard University Working Paper No. 1, 1999, 2, 5.

material prosperity the tribes in that region achieved in contrast to other Native Americans and how their cultures facilitated that prosperity.

The Great Basin

The Great Basin was never densely populated by Native Americans. When the Spanish first explored the area known as the Great Basin, they found the area sparsely populated except for small tribes who hunted and gathered for a living whose location often depended on the season and food source availability.² At that time, the area was populated by five main groups known as the Shoshone, Paiute, Ute, Bannock, and Washoe. The Paiute and Shoshone were further scattered into several different tribes that were later identified by Europeans by their location. Linguistic uniformity was a unique feature of the Great Basin Indians. With the exception of the Washoe in the Lake Tahoe area who like the Chumash in California spoke a Hokan language, all of the Great Basin tribes spoke one of six languages in the Numic branch of the Uto-Aztecan family.³

². "The Native People of North America: Great Basin Culture," Cabrillo College, March 9, 2000, accessed February 22, 2014, http://cabrillo.edu/~crsmith/noamer_basin.html.

³. Ibid.

Because of the arid territory, the tribes of the Great Basin lived mostly a life of subsistence from seeds, nuts, berries, and roots which were dug up with a digging stick.⁴ As in most Native American cultures, hunting also played a major role in the Great Basin diet. The Southern Paiute located in present-day, southern Utah and Nevada did grow beans, maize, and squash, but this was mostly limited to the stream banks which were few and far between.⁵ Hides and furs were used and sometimes combined with plants to provide clothing.⁶ Communal hunts for rabbits were common, similar to communal antelope hunts to the north. But, compared with neighboring regions, the Indian tribes of the Great Basin lived primitive lives which included widespread hunger throughout much of the year.⁷

Organization on a scale larger than the village was only temporary.⁸ The Great Basin Indians lived in tipis much smaller and less advanced than those popularized by the Great Plains Indians. The walls were usually covered by thatch or brush, although hide and bark

⁴. James A. Maxwell, *America's Fascinating Indian Heritage*, (New York: Reader's Digest, 1990), 251-255.

⁵. Alice Beck Kehoe, *North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981), 341-346.

⁶. Harold E. Driver, *Indians of North America*, (1961: The University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 148.

⁷. *Ibid*, 30.

⁸. Driver, 328.

were sometimes used as well. The high level of mobility of the tribes in this area caused many of these tipis to be built and taken down hastily.⁹

An example of the culture of poverty that dominated the tribes of The Great Plains is how they reacted to the horse. When the horse spread north in the wake of the Spanish invasion to the south, the animal transformed the lifestyle of the Plains Indians and improved their standard of living by making hunting and defense easier. However, the Shoshone and Paiutes to the west ate any horses they found because the horses competed for the herbs and plants that those tribes themselves ate.¹⁰ Much of their poverty however, can be attributed to the fact that they were landlocked and while geography is not the determining factor of prosperity or poverty, it can and does play a role in providing advantages and disadvantages.¹¹ The Indians of the Great Basin were among the poorest in North America and the infertile land, sparse hunting, and lack of access to major waterways no doubt contributed to this by putting them at a disadvantage that their neighbors to the northwest did not have.

⁹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰ Kehoe, 355.

¹¹ Gallup, Sachs, and Mellinger, 2, 5.

The Plateau

The Plateau is bordered by the Rockies to the east and Cascade Mountains to the West. It stretches about midway through Idaho and Oregon to the south and into Canada to the north. The people of the Plateau were divided into two linguistic families, the Saphatin of the Penutian family to the south and the Salish to the north.¹² The governments of these tribes were loose and tied to the local village with hunting and fishing territory being shared among villages and even among tribes with little or no objection. This was in stark contrast to Eastern tribes who often banned speakers of foreign languages from their territory.¹³ When the Blackfeet moved into the region from the East, the Nez Perce and the Salishian Coeur d'Alenes took up a much more structured form of government in which private property was taken more seriously and territorial boundaries were guarded more closely.

The people of the Plateau typically lived in pit houses that tended to be a little more elaborate than those of the primitive Southwest. In some ways, they were a cross between the wigwam, pit

¹² Alice Beck Kehoe, *North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981). 359.

¹³ Harold E. Driver, *Indians of North America*, (1961: The University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 335.

house, and tipi. They consisted of a pit four to five feet deep, with thatched roofs covered with earth from the pit for insulation, with numerous poles supporting the structure. A ladder led up through the smoke hole which was how they entered and exited the dwelling. Sometimes several families could live in one of these dwellings. During warm weather, the Plateau Indians slept outdoors.¹⁴

The Plateau Indians were mostly peaceful, lacking both the war culture of the nomadic Plains Indians and the fierce territorialism of the Northwest Coast natives.¹⁵ Although, their artwork was not as sophisticated as the Northwest Coast cultures, coiled baskets and soft woven bags produced by the people of the Plateau region show that they were capable of expert craftsmanship, but were likely prevented from fully developing their talents by the harsh environment in which they lived.¹⁶ Fishing was the mainstay of those living in the western Plateau; while those living to the east and north hunted big game such as moose, elk, and deer like their sub-Arctic and Plains neighbors, with wild plants also making up an important part of their diet.¹⁷

¹⁴ Kehoe, 357-360.

¹⁵ Driver, 15.

¹⁶ Phillip Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*, (1965: Chandler Publishing Company, San Francisco, CA), 109.

¹⁷ Driver, 27.

Trade flourished in the Plateau because of the Columbia River and its tributaries that connected the Plateau Indians with the tribes on the Northwest Coast, which also put them in a strategic position to be middlemen for the slave and horse trade between the Plains and Northwest Coast tribes once the horse was introduced. The horse was introduced into this region in the eighteenth century and some tribes such as the Yakimas and Nez Perces became expert breeders. The buckskin, skin-covered tepees, and feathered headdresses spread to the Plateau Indians beginning in the eighteenth century, but especially in the nineteenth century as the horse made cross-country travel and trade more accessible. The isolation that many of the Indian peoples had experienced for millennia faded with the introduction of the horse culture.¹⁸

Northwest Coast

If a European had traveled from the Atlantic Coast of Western Europe eastward, the further he travelled, the less sophisticated the societies he encountered would have become. He would see pockets of cultural gems here and there, but once he entered Eastern Europe, he would encounter societies little changed for thousands of years. As he

¹⁸ Kehoe, 357-360.

crossed the Asian steppes, he would find splintered, nomadic tribes. But, upon reaching China, Korea, and Japan, he would be as shocked as Marco Polo at the level of civilization - a level in some aspects superior to that of Europe. The same would have held true in North America. Had he traversed the entire breadth of the North American continent at the time of Columbus' landing at San Salvador in 1492, he would have seen a scaled-down version of Eurasia in North America's pattern of cultural advancement. The Indian tribes east of the Mississippi enjoyed plentiful agriculture and for their continent, fairly advanced societies. But, upon reaching the Prairie and Plains, the tribes became smaller, simpler, and more spread out. Upon arriving in the Plateau and Great Basin, the traveler would probably have been so depressed at the level of underdevelopment he would doubtless have assumed that only natives suffering from cold and hunger could be found on the West Coast. However, this was very far from the reality of the coastal tribes.¹⁹

In comparison to the Eastern, Plains, and Southwest Indians, little is known among the modern, general population of the Indians of the Northwest Coast in what is now northern California, Oregon,

¹⁹ Kehoe, 402.

Washington, British Columbia, Vancouver, and the Aleutian Islands.

But, it was here that the most advanced form of Native American culture existed in the future United States of America and Canada at the time of European discovery.

The Northwest Coast is extremely mountainous with the peaks along the mainland coast as well as on the islands reaching well over four thousand feet. The treacherous mountain ranges would make one assume that this area has most likely been sparsely populated throughout history, but Indian populations were extremely dense in this region before European exploration. One reason for this is that a warm current pushes in below the Aleutian Islands, producing a moderate climate and intense rainfall. This fair weather and heavy watering combines to produce rich vegetation which was beneficial to hunter-gatherer societies such as those on the Northwest Coast.²⁰ Forest and aquatic game were available in abundance, but because of the rugged terrain, hunting was not as easy or as profitable as fishing. Successful fishing required the development of technological knowledge, something in which the northwestern, coastal tribes proved amply rich at the time of European discovery. The environment of the

²⁰ Ibid, 1-2.

Northwest Coast remained fairly constant from the modern San Francisco Bay area all along the southern Alaskan coast. Yet, the technologically and culturally-advanced, area discussed here did not extend that length, soundly refuting the environmental determinist theory that cultures' advancement or simplicity is solely the result of adaptation to their surroundings. North of the Yakutat Bay in southeastern Alaska, the Indian cultures became less advanced and the same was true with cultures south of Cape Mendicino, California which is well north of San Francisco. For this reason, historical, cultural, and ethnic differences must be taken into account when one searches for an explanation for the difference in technology among the northwestern tribes.²¹

To the far northern section of this region lived the Tlingit and Haida tribes who were a part of the Athabascan family along the southern Alaskan coast and on Queen Charlotte Islands. These were the most advanced of Northwest Coast societies. The posts supporting their wood houses were carved with different forms of art and eventually evolved into the free standing totem poles for which the tribes of the Northwest coast are so well known. The Tsimshian were a

²¹ Ibid, 7-8.

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part of the Penutian family who lived just south of the Athabascans in northern British Columbia. The central region, which is today Vancouver Island and British Columbia were inhabited by the Kwakiutl people who spoke a Wakashan language, the Chinook, Nootkans, and to a lesser extent, the Bella Coola who were a Salishian tribe. These coastal Salish were related to Indians on the Plateau further east and are believed to be late arrivals along the coast who misplaced former inhabitants because they are related to the people further inland rather than the other coastal peoples.²² The southern groups were the Wakashan and Salish-speaking tribes in today's Washington and Oregon.²³

Diet

Agriculture has traditionally been considered a necessary component of advanced cultures, but the northwestern tribes produced affluent cultures without it, relying mainly on fishing, hunting, and limited gathering for food. According to Harold Driver, "no other area of equal size without agriculture anywhere in the world enjoyed as much material prosperity as did the North west Coast."²⁴ The only

²² Drucker, 107.

²³ Kehoe, 402-403.

²⁴ Driver, 529.

crop raised among the tribes of northern California was tobacco. This was “used in rituals and for its psychotropic effect.” In fact, the Northwest Coast was the only region of North America where tobacco was grown, but not smoked. These tribes only chewed it with lime.²⁵

It is possible that the Indians of California never developed agriculture because the amount of time irrigation, planting, and harvesting would have taken would have been much more than the time taken to collect and process acorns. Furthermore, acorns could be collected and processed by the women, freeing the men to hunt and fish. Acorns did not grow in abundance in this region the way they did among the tribes in the central and southern part of California, but berries were abundant throughout the entire Northwest Coast. A lack of starchy foods in the flora was made up for by whale oil and fat. Grilling, boiling, and steaming in pit ovens using wooden bowls and certain types of cooking baskets were the means that these tribes used to cook their food and they almost never ate their food raw.²⁶

It was the abundance of fish that allowed central California to grow the densest population in all of North America.²⁷ Because of the

²⁵ Ibid, 90.

²⁶ Ibid, 20.

²⁷ Kehoe, 377-378.

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abundance of edible fauna and the rich flora, the Northwest Coastal tribes developed the most advanced hunter-gatherer society the world has ever known. They practiced every form of hunting and trapping that was practiced elsewhere in North America, but because of the abundance of seafood, hunting was given less attention, although this varied depending on how far inland a tribe was. From May to September, they stored enough food to feed themselves and trade for an entire year and the rest of the year they devoted to pleasure and other tasks. The result was the development of a complex, social, class structure in which wealth was highly regarded and caused a person to gain considerable influence in the community.^{28,29}

Manufacturing and Architecture

The northwestern tribes were excellent woodworkers, attaining an advancement in in this craft that surpassed all other native peoples of North America. The red cedar of the coastal region was soft and pliable, making woodworking much easier for these tribes than for others. Hardwoods were used for small items such as crafts that demanded toughness and durability. Natives possessed iron knives and ornaments of copper and knew how to work both. Copper came from

²⁸ Ibid, 290.

²⁹ Drucker, 15.

deep within the Alaskan mainland, but it is unknown whether the iron was traded from Asia by the Eskimos who are known to have traded with eastern Asian tribes as early as 1,000 A.D., found from shipwrecked Asian ships, or meteoritic.³⁰ Using stone and bone drills, axes, chisels, and knives, they were able to fell and carve the red and yellow cedars found in their region. They were especially skilled canoe builders. Most of their canoes were dugouts which they carved from one log. They came in many different shapes and sizes, depending on the purpose of the boat.³¹ They used these canoes to fish, travel, and fight. A fishing canoe could be only big enough for two men to fit in, while a war canoe or their version of a war ship could fit fifty and be up to sixty-five feet in length. These larger canoes were also used to ferry important nobility to feasts, or potlatches as they were called. They also sculpted large, troughs from which they ate, large storage boxes, basket, and hats.³² Other wood implements made by these tribes were cradles, drums, sea hunter's quivers, and chamber pots.³³

³⁰ Kehoe, 427.

³¹ Maxwell, 298.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 31

The most advanced architectural feat of the Northwest Coast tribes was their multi-family houses. These houses were supported by log posts which were filled in with planks, stretching horizontally or vertically. The logs remained in place, but the planks used for walls and roofs were transported to other locations when a village moved. Some houses were built with a one-pitch, shed-like roof and it is believed these were how the plank houses began and were then added on to.³⁴ Along the Oregon coast, rectangular houses of cedar planks between post frames with sloping roofs were built. These tribes also built thatched storehouses or barns.³⁵ Their houses ranged in size from thirty by forty-five feet to as large as one thousand feet long in which an entire village would live.³⁶

A description of a Kwakiutl village in 1792 revealed a village of about three hundred fifty people that contained twelve houses of split log planks in each of which several families were housed. About ninety dug-out canoes were drawn up to the houses or were being used

³⁴ Driver, 109-110.

³⁵ Kehoe, 417.

³⁶ Ibid, 301.

in the water.³⁷ The Nootkas' built their houses in such a way that dismantling them before winter, leaving only the stakes and moving on with the planks was no difficult task.³⁸ The possession of whale oil on the upper storage shelves was a source of pride for individuals whose families had took part in the whale slaying.³⁹

A typical Chinook house was about sixty by forty feet and housed four families. Two sets of shelves ran along the walls, the upper for storage and the lower for bunks. Each family had its own hearth in the center of the house and closeable smoke holes were built into the roofs. Most villages had one extremely long house, usually up to three hundred feet in length for potlatches and other ceremonies. Sometimes the village chief and his family would live in it. Most villages were fortified.⁴⁰ The tribes who lived more towards the interior tended to build their houses underground with only the roof and gable with a window above ground. This was most likely influenced from the Plateau and Basin pit house cultures.⁴¹

³⁷ Andrey Zlobin, "Car Market of Russia," *Forbes*, June 20, 2012, <http://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya/rynki/83283-avtorynok-rossii-kogda-sokratitsya-otstavanie-ot-ssha>.

³⁸ Drucker, 144-145.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 149.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 420.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 26-27.

In addition to being excellent wood workers, the Northwest Coast natives were also expert weavers. Mountain goat wool, tree bark, and bird down were the main tools in this industry. Matting was the primary textile of most of these tribes. Their mats were made for furniture, sails, wallets, mattresses, and tablecloths.⁴²

Art

The Northwest Coast has been identified by one recognizable art style. Pictures of animals, monsters, and humans were carved and painted on houses, canoes, boxes, and especially totem pole which were set up in front of houses and graveyards as memorials to the dead.⁴³ All carving and works of art were painted red and black. The images painted were representations of supernatural beings which had supposedly made themselves known to the ancestors of the artists doing the painting. The art of the northern tribes such as the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian were distinctive for their emphasis on the object's face and stylization, whereas, the Kwakiutl, Nootka, and Salish were more natural and realistic.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid, 34-37.

⁴³ Drucker, 22.

⁴⁴ Driver, 189-191.

Unlike the Wakashan-speaking tribes to the south who buried their dead in boxes in caves, the Tsimshian mostly cremated their dead. Poles and sometimes new houses were built as memorials for the important, upper class deceased, with all expenses paid by the family. The Tsimshian were especially renowned for their creative art which they painted on necessary objects such as utensils, house posts, and storage boxes. These images usually included animals, supernatural beings, or monsters.⁴⁵

Division of Labor

Ninety-five percent of the labor was performed exclusively by men, which was the most intense division of labor by gender anywhere on the continent. In Northwest Coast societies, ownership of property such as houses or fishing holes was different from the modern concept of private property and mainly meant the right to oversee the use of it.⁴⁶ Slaves made up an estimated ten to twenty per cent of the Northwest Coast and were generally treated poorly by their owners.⁴⁷ Part of the value set on slaves involved what kind of labor skills they had. Wealth such as lands and houses was the collective property of a family or

⁴⁵ Ibid, 126-131.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 531-533.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

clan even though it was spoken of often as belonging to the individual who acquired them. Wealth was accumulated to provoke envy in outsiders and pride in members of one's own family and clan or allies. The ability to dispose of or destroy wealth was considered a luxury of which one was proud. This resulted in many slaves being murdered as masters wished to show off to others that they were wealthy enough to throw away the life of a slave.⁴⁸ Slavery was highly shameful for those captured and their people and if they belonged to a nearby tribe, that tribe usually offered vast amounts of wealth to buy them back.⁴⁹

Potlatch

Potlatches were huge feasts, often celebrating the bequeathing of a title onto someone or as an announcement of one's claim to a title or rank. In it, the host would give lavish gifts to his guests to prove his worth through his wealth. Guests would extol the abilities of the subject of the celebration and both the subject, who was often the host and the guests would brag on their ancestors and admonish the young men to emulate their virtues. Dances and performances were common features of these feasts.⁵⁰ Wrestling, tug-of-war, weightlifting, and foot

⁴⁸ Drucker, 50-52.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Kehoe, 410.

racers were common forms of competition among the men, while gambling and mythtelling were forms of amusement participated in by both men and women.⁵¹ After the potlatch, his neighbors would give him the respect due his new title or position. Many of these celebrations were attended by hundreds of people, some of them travelling for days to get to them.⁵² The more titles a tribe had, the more potlatches its people attended. For instance, among the thirteen divisions of the Kwakiutl, there were six hundred fifty-eight titles, some of which were “creating trouble all around,” throwing away property,” “about whose property people talk,” and even “getting too great.”⁵³

Government and Marriage

The people of the northwestern coast formed a very class-conscious society. Lineages were highly respected and arranged marriages were performed among the aristocracy from which the chiefs came so as not to pollute noble blood.⁵⁴ In most Northwest Coast nations, governance was based on wealth, making the richest man in a tribe or village its ruler. The exception to this was the tribes

⁵¹ Drucker, 67-68.

⁵² Maxwell, 290.

⁵³ Driver, 226.

⁵⁴ Kehoe, 408-409.

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living further to the south in the region covered in this paper: the Yurok, Karok, Hupa, Klamoth, and Madoc. These tribes lived in virtual anarchy. They developed a much more organized and observed pattern of solving crimes like their northern neighbors with blood money, only because they spent a good deal of their time in feuds. Private property was jealously guarded and adultery was a serious offense because it was viewed as a serious violation of property rights. Although, their wealth paled in comparison to their coastal neighbors farther north, they were extremely obsessed with riches and spent much of their leisure time thinking about and praying for riches.⁵⁵

Brides were paid dearly for and it was common for girls to be confined in separate rooms for long periods of time before marriage so that their fair skin would attract a higher price and a marriage with a higher-ranking young man on the social ladder.⁵⁶ The more possessions the family of a man gave to his future bride's family as a price for her, the more his family could expect to receive from her relatives at a later potlatch.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Drucker, 177-179.

⁵⁶ Driver, 267.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 530.

Clothing

In clothing, the Northwest Coast tribes made extensive use of furs and pelts and had an abundance of rain clothes, particularly protective hats and waterproof ponchos of plant materials. During warm weather, men usually went naked except for ornaments and hats while women always at least wore skirts except in rare ceremonial circumstances. Tattooing, body piercing, and the wearing of ornaments were common among both genders⁵⁸ Most of the coastal tribes were aware of buckskin and moccasins and owned them through trade, but these were mainly used by the more northern tribes in cold weather.⁵⁹

The proximity of the northwestern, coastal tribes to Asia and the islands of the Pacific produced an obvious, shared culture. There have been many examples of shipwrecked Asian ships off the Northwest coast. Although the major Asian powers are not known to have established any regular trade, certain cultural similarities have been found in tattooing, hat styles, wooden armor, and the Indians familiarity with iron.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Driver, 138.

⁵⁹ Drucker, 41.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 428.

Government, Law, & Warfare

Among all the Northwest Coast tribes, ruling was based on wealth and heredity. It was common for one family to own an entire village, but this only meant that they and more specifically, whoever the head of that family was at the time were the overseers of that village. The larger the village, the more power and influence that family and that family's head had in the tribe. Multiple villages were united in tribelets and the size of these tribelets affected the power and influence of its main family among that people group.⁶¹

Except for brief, military alliances, local clans or families were governed internally and autonomously, dispensed its own justice. If a member of one clan murdered someone of another, the offended clan would demand the life of someone of equal social standing in order to restore peace. This arrangement was accepted willingly sometimes, but other times, inter-tribal warfare or the payment of blood money had to solve the issue. Warfare was usually fought over land rights. In fact, shortly before the arrival of Europeans, an Eskimo group on an island in the Gulf of Alaska was exterminated by various other tribes in the area. Extermination or total enslavement were generally the goals in

⁶¹ Driver, 333.

warfare since leaving part of the enemy alive and free could mean having to fight the same tribe again in the future.⁶² Northern tribes wore wooden helmets and weapons were those used in close combat. When an enemy had been slaughtered, their homes were looted and burned and their heads displayed on poles as trophies in front of the attackers' village.⁶³

Although most of these tribes possessed large war canoes, they were mostly for transportation, pursuit, and retreat and rarely did engagements happen at sea. If a tribe could not defend itself through conventional warfare, it would split into various groups, head for the forest and form a subsistence lifestyle mixed with guerilla warfare. The Xaihais were one such tribe that was nearly exterminated and forced to hide in remote areas and eat raw meat for fear of revealing their location through fires. They would likely have been exterminated by neighboring tribes after their hunting and fishing land if it had not been for the Pax Britannica that put an end to tribal warfare.⁶⁴ In later prehistoric times, some Tlingit groups joined the Tsimshian who gave them tracts of land to live in. These Tlingit adopted the language of

⁶² Drucker, 70-76.

⁶³ Ibid, 79.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 80-82.

their new neighbors and together extinguished an Athabaskan-speaking Tahltan tribe through annihilation and slavery.⁶⁵

Trade

Trade with groups from other geographic regions was fairly limited unless a tribe had access to a river that led beyond the mountains. The location that served as the trade hub for these tribes was The Dalles, a location along the Columbia River of a boiling falls and rapids that was not a vertical drop, but a slow series of rapids that made it difficult for fish, particularly salmon to travel, forcing them into shallow pools near the banks. This made for great fishing and tribes from hundreds of miles to the east would make the trip to barter for dried salmon. It was mainly the result of this trade that Lewis and Clark on their expedition used a Shoshone woman as an interpreter on their quest to find the river that they had heard emptied into the Pacific.⁶⁶ The Chinook were the dominant tribe along the Oregon-Washington coast, mainly because they controlled the mouth of the Columbia River where most of the trade flowed outward. As a result, their language became the basis of the common language of the region.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 105.

⁶⁶ Drucker, 169.

This came to be known as Chinook Jargon and eventually borrowed aspects of Nootka, English, and French.⁶⁷

The Nootkans produced dentalium shells, which was the monetary unit of the Northwest Coast. The only other tribe known to gather the shells was the Southern Kwakiutl and they frequently intermarried with the Nootka.⁶⁸ The gathering of dentalium shells and their processing was a slow, tedious process which ensured it a stable value.⁶⁹ The Nootkans' superb boat-building and their near monopoly on the production of currency caused their language to influence the Chinook jargon. They were also among the most numerous of the Northwestern tribes, numbering around ten thousand at the end of the eighteenth century.⁷⁰

The Klamoth and Madoc tribes were on the border region between the Northwest and Plateau cultures. They lived in Earth-covered pithouses in winter and wigwams in summer like the Plateau tribes.⁷¹ Although these tribes were not as affluent as the Northwest Coast tribes, they put more emphasis on the accumulation of wealth

⁶⁷ Kehoe, 419.

⁶⁸ Drucker, 151.

⁶⁹ Kehoe, 425.

⁷⁰ Drucker, 144-145.

⁷¹ Kehoe, 416.

than did the Plateau tribes and it was among the wealthy that their leaders came. The Klamoth and Madoc frequently raided a neighboring tribe for slaves, keeping however many they needed and selling others at the Dalles. This continued until 1869. As in most slave societies, the captives were denigrated and given much poorer quarters than the masters, furthermore, female captives were regularly treated as concubines.⁷²

Conclusion

The Northwestern Indian tribes differed greatly from the tribes throughout the rest of North America. In fact the cultures of the Plateau and Great Basin when compared to the cultures of the Northwest Coast were so different from one another they could have been on separate continents. The Great Basin tribes mostly acquired their food by hunting small game like rabbits, picking berries when and where they could find them, and digging for roots. The tribes of the Great Basin were slightly better off as far as game was concerned and adopted many of architectural techniques of their neighbors to the east and west as contact with other tribes increased. These tribes benefitted from trade with the Northwest Coast, but did not have much

⁷² Ibid.

tribal organization and tended to be somewhat nomadic like the Basin and Plains cultures.

The Northwest Coast however, was nothing in comparison to the primitiveness of the Rocky Mountain and Plateau Indians. These tribes did not live in tipis, wigwams, or pits, but rather took full advantage of the abundance of natural resources that they had access to unlike their distant neighbors to the east and built large, comfortable houses of wood planks, canoes, totem poles, and elaborate crafts. The wealth, prosperity, and leisure experienced by these people, isolated from the eastern part of the continent by the Great Divide made their advanced existence all the more intriguing. But, perhaps the greatest anomaly of the Northwest Coast Indians is the fact they reached this level of wealth as a hunter-gatherer society, something that in the annals of history and discoveries of archeology has never been recorded.⁷³

⁷³ Driver, 529.