

INDIAN RELIGION

- There was a supreme Indian deity – the Great Spirit or Wakan Tanka – but many were polytheistic,
- All elements in the natural world were connected and contained spirits (medicine)
- A shaman /medicine man led most religious Indian rituals and dances were designed to keep in touch with the spirit world, e.g. the buffalo dance, war dance or sun dance. Thus they dressed in animal skins, mostly the bear as the strongest.
- Males could communicate with the spirits after receiving their vision through starvation or the Sun Dance, where they tortured themselves with amputation or skewering themselves with wooden stakes and elevating. Females could communicate once they reached puberty.
- Both Braves and Squaws could contact the spirit world through a spirit quest following a spirit fox or spirit eagle into the wilderness and being completely independent and starving themselves.
- They believed in animal magic, badger blood to tell the future, the horned toad to find the buffalo and the heart of a Bull Elk for finding love.
- They would use buffalo skulls and bury their hearts to give them back to the Earth.

INDIAN FAMILY LIFE

- Indians lived in tipis and were nomadic, following the buffalo, moving their tipis etc. on a travois pulled by dogs / horses.
- However, in the winter the Indians would live in large lodges with up to 60 people.
- Most marriages were monogamous, but warfare might lead to polygamy.
- Old people were respected for their wisdom, but they abandoned the tribe to die when they could no longer keep up. They often acted as teachers and chiefs.
- Boys (Braves) were trained to hunt and girls (Squaws) to perform household tasks like preparing the buffalo.
- Engagements could last 6 years and often required a dowry of horse.
- Women made most of the goods and owned them. This meant men rarely divorced them.
- These tribes were split into bands of 20-30. The Comanche bands intermingled whereas the Pawnee lived in separate villages.

WHITE ATTITUDES

- The earliest white Americans considered the Great Plains to be the ‘Great American Desert’. They moved the Creek, Cherokee and Seminole there in 1830. This was to be a ‘Permanent Indian Frontier’ after the 1834 Indian Trade and Intercourse Act.
- White Americans saw polygamy as immoral, abandoning fights as cowardice, counting coup as bizarre, scalping savage and polytheism, spirits, the Sun Dance and Animal magic as barbaric.
- Whites believed land could be owned and Indians had no real right to the land as they didn’t develop, farm or mine it for resources or ‘work’ at commerce so they were seen as lazy.
- They had a central government and the rule of law so they did not understand Indian bands ignoring chiefs.
- The Great Migration West was 1843, but once Texas became part of the US in 1846, Oregon Territory in 1846 and the territories in the South West in 1848, the government pushed mass migration.
- By 1851 they started to proactively take land from the Indians to enable settlement in the Fort Laramie Treaty and Indian Appropriations Act.

PLAINS INDIANS

INDIAN WARFARE

- Wars were designed to gain honour /revenge or taking horses
- To save lives counting coup was prized, during horse raids, which meant touching an opponent with a coup stick to gain a feather in a headdress.
- . They tended to abandon the fight in order that the tribe did not lose many people
- If there was a fight over honour, or a fight with a fierce rival (Pawnee and Sioux) then there may have been scalping to stop the enemy from reaching the Happy Hunting Ground. Warrior Brotherhoods would help train braves for war.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BUFFALO AND HORSE

- The horse in 17th century became a form of status, used to indicate the power of the tribe, it changed hunting practices, was used in marriage and was a key focus of warfare.
- The Indians used the whole buffalo, not just the flesh / kidneys and brain / offal for food like Pemmican and Jerky. Skins could be used as clothing, moccasins, shields and tipis, horns for cups, bladders for bags, tails for swats, tongues for brushes, sinews for bow strings, bones for arrow heads and clubs, buffalo chips as fuel and skulls and heart for religious practices.

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PLAINS INDIANS

- Indians were divided into nations, then tribes, then bands.
- Indian councils made of band and tribal chiefs, with requisite societal, military, hunting or religious skills or age and experience, made decisions at the Summer Camp. However, bands did not have to obey the Council decisions outside camp.
- Warrior Brotherhoods, like the Crow Owners, White Horse Riders and Strong hearts organised / secured the Summer Camp, trained the braves and lived outside society.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LAND

- Indians believed nature worked in circles – the sun, the seasons and life itself thus tipis were round, villages were built in circles and dances took the form of a circle. Everything returned to the land.
- So there was no ownership of land as it belonged to everyone / everything
- Thus they disagreed with mining and farming because they were of the land and when they did farm the land was used communally.
- The most sacred of lands to the Sioux were the Black Hills of Dakota