North American Indians – Expanded Lecture Notes – Northwest

Geography and Climate:

The Northwest Coast culture area covers a strip of land approximately 1500-2000 miles in length and roughly 100 miles wide, running from the northwestern tip of California to the panhandle of Alaska. The area is one of rugged coasts, cliffs, and to the East, the Coastal Range and Cascade mountains. As the mountains turn and head out to see, the culture area also includes offshore islands such as the Queen Charlottes in British Columbia and Vancouver Island.

In terms of its climate, the area is tremendously humid yet temperate despite its advanced latitude. This extra warming is caused by the Japanese Currents which bring warm tropical waters to the coast, making this area much more tolerable, than say, Nova Scotia (on the other side of the continent).

Lifestyle, Subsistence, and Social Structure:

The humidity and temperate climate support a unique environment of what amounts to rainforest sporting spruces, hemlock, firs, cedars, and redwoods. These woods, in turn, were home to numerous deer, elk, moose, beaver, bear, fox, and mink. Unfortunately, these animals were often found in rugged upland country that was less accessible than the abundantly producing ocean. Consequently, the cultures found along the coasts all tended to have a maritime fishing subsistence, utilizing the above mentioned animals primarily in the winter months when snows and lack of forage forced the animals to lower elevations.

The overall abundance of food in this region, much like the abundance found in California and the Plateau, enabled Northwest peoples to enjoy a sedentary lifestyle. Indeed, one could easily argue that the Northwest represents the most sophisticated level of cultural complexity possible for what are essentially hunters and gatherers. This places them into the same complex hunter-gatherer category that we saw in California; they were not organized into tribelets, however. There was no need for agriculture to be practiced in this area (nor was it feasible due to the short season), so the only widespread crops we find are tobacco plants. The ocean, rivers, and forest seemed to have supplied the bounty needed to support the people admirably.

From the oceans and rivers, the people collected whale, seal, sea lion, otter, halibut, sturgeon, herring, smelt, cod, salmon, various shellfish, and a unique fish called the eulachon (candlefish). This small fish is high in oil and when dried, can burn like a candle. Its oils could also be rendered through a laborious and smelly process.

In addition to their animal residents, the forests also supplied wood for housing, art, clothing, and durable goods. The moisture-resistant cedars composed the poles and removable siding of the plankhouses found in this area (see text for details), provided the hulls of dugout canoes holding up to 65 people, made up the up to 35 foot tall totem poles marking family lineages and land ownership, had their bark shredded for clothing manufacture, and were used to construct an array of masks, boxes, bowls, and other utilitarian items. Cedar was the preferred wood for so many things because of its workability with stone and bone tools, tendency to split into long-even planks, and the already mentioned moisture resistance.

Because so many basic and not so basic needs could be met through their environment, the Northwest Indians developed a sedentary culture with social organization at the level of the independent villages and the kin group. These villages each owned and jealously guarded rights to certain parcels of land that were resource-bearing – either in terms of fish, plant material, or what have you. Even being caught accidentally trespassing on another village’s land could mean death. Thus, one’s loyalty was to the village in which one lived, even if that meant warring with another village in which there might be relatives, even close ones. The kin associations, in northern tribes, tended toward matrilineality while the southern and central tribes tended to bilateral kin recognition with a slight emphasis on patrilineality for purposes of inheritance. There were also moieties with each linguistic group as well (I don’t want to use the word tribe because the Indians were not at that level of organization), with the moieties being Raven and Eagle in the North and Raven and Wolf in the South. Finally, residence was patrilocal, meaning that
although family was determined matrilineally, the only blood relatives in a home were males related through their mothers (I will explain this in class).

Individuals within each clan and between clans were ranked. In a ranked society, there are criteria that determine a relationship of superiority/inferiority between each and every member. This is in contrast to an egalitarian system in which everyone has roughly equal status. One’s personal rank (remember that ranking was very unusual for hunters and gatherers) was based on kinship ties, personal wealth, and any promotions one may have received from the clan chief. These clan chiefs were considered then owners and leaders of the plankhouses that composed the villages, and even had private walled quarters within them (even though the main structure itself was shared with other families).

Potlatches:

At the death of a clan chief, his successor, who was often named before death, would hold a potlatch to accomplish three things. First, the potlatch affirms his rights of leadership over the other families because to successfully hold one, he needs all of their help. Second, it is an opportunity to make allies and connections to neighboring groups that are invited to the potlatch. Finally, it is a means of redistributing the wealth of the previous chief and the new one to others. So what is a potlatch? The potlatch is a grand ceremony, several days long, filled with entertainment, obscene quantities of food, and the giving away of spectacular amounts of personal wealth – even if that means calling in favors or asking for new ones in order to accumulate the largest amount of wealth to give away. Anthropologically, these activities serve as leveling mechanisms and exist to ensure that no one person ever accumulates too much wealth. In return for giving away the personal property, the individual hosting the potlatch receives enormous amounts of prestige and honor. These feasts and giveaways could also be held to commemorate weddings and other important social occasions.

Technology:

The Indians of the Northwest Coast developed quite a sophisticated material culture, based around the abundant wood mentioned earlier. In addition to the uses of the cedar tree already mentioned, the wood also was used for: coffins, dye, mats for wall and floor covering, baskets, hats, raincoats, and armor for war. Everything was elaborate and decorated, even utilitarian items (see text for some examples). Their masks and totem poles are especially noted as being intricate (again, see text)

Totem Poles:

See text, but also remember that they are not typically religious in nature but are used to note clan and lineage affiliation and to mark ownership of territory and houses. Occasionally one would also be erected as a “shame pole” to denote a particularly poor performance or mistake of an individual. They could also be used as grave markers for important people as well.

Languages:

Think of the languages as a key to who lived in the northern, central, or southern areas.
North: Athabascan Tlingit, Penutian Tsimshian, and a language isolate, the Haida
Central: Salishan speaking Bella Coola, Nootka, and Makah; Wakashan speaking Kwakiutl
South: Coastal Salish people (also their language), Penutian Chinook, Quileute, and Coos; Athabascan Umpqua

Beliefs:

One could draw power from vision quests as well as from the power of one’s ancestors. There were more specialized shamans in this area who belonged to one or more societies, the most well known of which is the Hamatasa. In general, these hunters and gatherers had a very complex religious round centered on the seasonal cycle of moving part of the village to better resource areas, but there is still the ever present need to cure and so forth.