North American Indians Lecture Notes- Plains

Geography:
The Plains culture area includes those areas south of Canada's Saskatchewan river to the Gulf of Mexico/Rio Grande area, and from the western side of the Rockies to the Eastern shore of the Mississippi River. In the eastern portion, this area is dominated by riverine environment and lightly forested grasslands to more open and arid prairie as one approaches the Rockies. Terrain is in general flat and featureless, broken by river valleys and stands of trees around those rivers. Heavily matted grass roots made prairie farming extremely difficult, but this was not the case in the eastern portion of the area.

Climate:
Prehistorically, the area was quite dry after about 8000 BC - about the time that the megafauna went extinct. In proto-historical and historical times, there were hot, humid summers and cold, wind-swept winters through much of the area, just as we see today in our Midwestern states.

Languages:
This area is linguistically diverse, with four phyla, six families, and literally hundreds of cultural divisions represented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phylum</th>
<th>Families and cultural divisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aztec-Tanoan</td>
<td>Kiowa-Tanoan (Kiowa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uto-Aztecan (Comanche)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro-Algonkian</td>
<td>Algonkian (Arapaho, Atsina, Blackfoot, Cheyenne)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro-Siouan</td>
<td>Caddoan (Caddo, Arikara, Pawnee, Wichita), Siouan (Crow, Dakota, Hidatsa, Kansa, Mandan, Omaha, Osage, Iowa, others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na-Dene</td>
<td>Athabaskan (Sarsi; Kiowa, Mescalero, Chiracahua, and Lipan Apache)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the sheer variety of languages present in the area and the frequency with which their speakers contacted one another, some common ground was needed for communication. This was provided in two forms. The first was a common sign language useful in trade and meetings and the other was fostering (in later times) of children between tribes in order to spread goodwill as well as linguistic understanding.

Social Structure:
Interestingly, there were tribes of both matrilineal (Mandan, Hidatsa, Crow) and patrilineal (Omaha, Oto, Kansa) design in this culture area. NB: these six are just examples, there are others. Labor was typically divided in an egalitarian fashion, especially on the open plains where small group size meant that everyone had to know how to do everyone else's "job". Another structuring mechanism found in Plains groups is concept of the Association or Society. There were a variety of these, including warrior societies, medicine societies, and so forth. One would typically belong to one or more of these at different points in one's life. Association memberships cut across clan and social class lines, acting as a kind of leveling mechanism. Most of these groups were male-only, although a few for purposes of ritual surrounding birth, women's work (like bead-making), etc. did exist.
Religion, Belief, and Values:
Personal experience, honor, and bravery were in general the rules of the day, at least among men. Competence in one's work was highly valued, whether it be hunting, cooking, or war. In war, a young male would typically belong to a warrior society by his 14th year and was expected to have counted coup by this time (see your text). In religious life, the vision quest returns here as a means of contacting one's personal spirit guardian (esp. important to warriors). These supernatural beings granted powers to individuals and were often the source of "ideas" about what to carry in one's medicine bundle, songs, and general ways to live. Contact with one's guardian could be renewed through VQs later in life or through traumatic activity like the Sun Dance (see your text for more on this). In general, religion was not centered around a major theme like "Agriculture", but was much more personal. Specific religious ceremonies were conducted through an appropriate medicine society or through unifying events like the yearly gatherings at which Sun Dances took place. Note that the Sun Dance is probably a relatively late addition to Plains culture since its form is virtually identical among all Plains groups, suggesting that it has not had the time to become particularly differentiated or diffused.

Warfare:
War was typically by raid and ambush, with only rare face-to-face confrontations. Coup counting was a preferred method of showing one's bravery and prowess (not to mean that deaths never did occur - they did). Men captured in war were either enslaved or sometimes adopted if they were particularly brave and honorable; women and children were more often than not just adopted as new members.

Lifestyle:
Two general patterns dominated this region. In the oasis-like areas around the fertile river valleys and flood plains, a sedentary pattern of farming developed. This was in contrast with the open prairie areas that featured the "traditional" image of the Plains Indian - the horse-mounted, feather-bedecked warrior. As you will see below, this is a relatively new image and somewhat false. From this point on, I will try to differentiate between these two main subgroups rather than make generalizations about the entire region.

Sedentary Farmers
Dwellings
A typical northern plains sedentary dwelling consisted of a rectangular or circular semi-subterranean houses, dug in 1-3' to providing a low profile against wind, snow, and so forth as well as providing some measure of insulation. This was not typically followed on the truly open plains due to the hardpan nature of the earth - it was too hard to dig into without metal tools. These homes were then covered with log and earth or branch frameworks with a smokehole left open in the center. Many had entrances large enough for horses to be admitted during harsh winter storms. Tribes in this pattern include the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa. Southern sedentary farmers built houses reminiscent of beehives, constructed of thatch with no smokeholes (less harsh winters). Examples here include the Wichita and Caddo.
Social Structure
In their social structure, these groups were more rigid than their nomadic brethren on the open plains. Living in close proximity to one another implies a need for more rigid structure to keep order, thus the villages placed more importance on clan relationships and did have semi-permanent chiefs or councils of leaders to oversee activities.

Subsistence and Technology
In addition to the big three (corn, beans, and squash) and sunflowers, hunting parties also brought in deer, elk, bear, beaver, bighorn sheep, and (in the right areas) fish and waterfowl. Hunting parties would also be sent into the open prairies to bring in bison from time to time as well. Trade between groups was also a part of life, ensuring dissemination of technology and goods as well as strengthening ties.

Plains Nomads
These were the folks whose lives depended on and revolved around the bison. In pre-contact times, these groups moved in small multi-family bands across the plains using semi-domesticated dogs as a beast of burden. Bison are not well known for their map reading skills, and so tend to wander from place to place, never quite following the same route as truly migratory species do. This meant that EVERYTHING a group owned it had to carry with it, so traveling light was a must.

Dwelling
Possessions were often lashed to a structure called a travois which consisted of two long (5-6 foot) poles and a connecting piece of hide or other material, arranged in A-frame fashion, which the dogs could pull. Possessions, children, or the elderly could then ride on the cross arm of the frame. When camping for the night, the frame was disassembled and the poles used to construct the traditional open plains home – the Ti-Pi (spellings vary), with the skins used to form the outer walls. The next day, the group would re-pack and follow the ever-moving herds of bison on to the next watering hole. The horse (see below) would alter this lifestyle immeasurably.

Social Structure
As mentioned, small family groups were the norm for everyday travel, as the carrying capacity of the land for humans was low when I large groups. These small bands did, however, recognize tribal and clan affiliations, and would strengthen these at large gathering once or twice a year. At these gatherings, marriages were arranged, ties renewed, news spread, and so forth. These were the typical venues for the summer Sun Dance as well, although not all SDs were conducted in the summer. Due to the small group sizes, a complex social structure was impractical, and most leadership was on an ad-hoc basis with particularly competent individuals coming forward temporarily for a given task. Also as mentioned above, egalitarianism was the rule of the day since in a small group, task specialization is not efficient – what happens if you lose your only bison skinner?

Technological Adaptation and Subsistence
The bison was the source of the bulk of the food and possessions (see attachment for some of the bison's uses). Additional food sources included incidental plants that the group might encounter in its travels following herds. Bison were hunted in a variety of manners. First were communal
"drives" to push the bison into prepared killing areas (with no escape) or over cliffs. These often required the participation of men and women, and sometimes cooperation between family groups or tribes. This was a fairly wasteful method, however, since so many bison were killed this way that only the choicest parts could be processed before the rest went bad. Another method was to sneak up on the animals covered in either bison or wolf skin and either use thrusting spears or bow and arrow to bring down one or two of the animals. This was the method used most of the time, since a successful drive was a major undertaking. Here, too, trade was sometimes engaged in although the slow (3-6 miles per day) rate of travel meant that not much ground was covered in short time spans.

The Coming of the Horse

Archaeologically, we do have evidence of the horse in the Plains – until several thousand years ago. Many peoples still hold oral history of the horse as having been a gift of the gods which was taken away for transgressions. When the horse was "returned to them" by the Spanish, it was seen as a reward for proper living and behavior. Initially, though, many Plains groups saw the horse as an additional food source, until its utility as a beast of burden became apparent. Many Plains words for the horse are derivations or allusions to the previous beast of burden - the dog. Replacing dogs with horses meant that more possessions could be carried, tipis could become larger since travois poles could be increased in size from 6 to up to 12 or more feet, and in fact, the whole way of life could change.

Riding horses meant that more distance could be covered in a day for those on horseback (not everyone rode), so more permanent camps could be established from which hunting parties forayed into the distance. Every few days (rather than daily) the camp would be struck and the group move after the herds (which, by the way, were now under more intense pressure due to the added efficiency and speed of the horse-mounted hunters). Once vacant land could now be occupied due to this added mobility also. Warfare was enhanced by the speed and mobility of the horse, and one's manhood could be measured now by not only prowess in battle but also by how accomplished a horse thief he was! In fact, thievery from the Spanish was the original source for all Plains horses, but before long the Natives took to breeding their own stock, setting the stage for the famous "Indian ponies" one sometimes still hears about today. Social structure came to be affected by the horse as well, with wealth being measured by the number that one kept, and the number of wives kept to care for them. Among the Crow, for example, a poor man might own only 20 or 30, while a well-to-do individual might stable 60 or more. Some particularly powerful individuals were said to own hundreds of animals. Finally, the horse not only increased the distance over which trade amongst all (open and sedentary) Plains groups could be accomplished, it also became a medium of exchange itself! In fact, the mobility of the horse was a prime instigator in the development of large regional trade fairs at which hostilities were suspended and even warring groups gathered to engage in barter of goods and horses (Anglos eve attended these affairs). These fairs differed from the annuals gatherings mentioned earlier in that they were not limited to members of one particular tribe, but were open to all.

For all of their advantages, though, the image of the Plains horseman was a short-lived one. The horse wasn't really in use until after 1670, reached its height in the mid 1800s, and by 1870 had largely died out due to the intensification of the Indian removal programs in the Plains area (a good example here is the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie which moved the Sioux onto reservations, and paved the way for the Black Hills conflict mentioned in the "Spirit of Crazy Horse" video).