Part 1 – Early First Nations: The Six Main Geographical Groups

Before the arrival of Europeans, First Nations in what is now Canada were able to satisfy all of their material and spiritual needs through the resources of the natural world around them. For the purposes of studying traditional First Nations cultures, historians have therefore tended to group First Nations in Canada according to the six main geographic areas of the country as it exists today. Within each of these six areas, First Nations had very similar cultures, largely shaped by a common environment.

The six groups were: **Woodland First Nations**, who lived in dense boreal forest in the eastern part of the country; **Iroquoian First Nations**, who inhabited the southernmost area, a fertile land suitable for planting corn, beans and squash; **Plains First Nations**, who lived on the grasslands of the Prairies; **Plateau First Nations**, whose geography ranged from semi-desert conditions in the south to high mountains and dense forest in the north; **Pacific Coast First Nations**, who had access to abundant salmon and shellfish and the gigantic red cedar for building huge houses; and the **First Nations of the Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins**, whose harsh environment consisted of dark forests, barren lands and the swampy terrain known as muskeg.

The following section highlights some of the wide variations in the six groups' social organization, food resources, and homes, modes of transportation and clothing -- as well as spiritual beliefs widely shared by all Early First Nations.

Social Organization

Most Woodland First Nations were made up of many independent groups, each with its own hunting territory. These groups usually had fewer than 400 people. A leader generally won his position because he possessed great courage or skill in hunting. Woodland First Nations hunters and trappers had an intimate knowledge of the habitats and seasonal migrations of animals that they depended on for survival.

Unlike Woodland First Nations, Iroquoian First Nations did not migrate in search of food. Excellent farmers, these southern peoples harvested annual food crops of corn, beans and squash that more than met their needs. An abundance of food supplies made it possible for the Iroquoian First Nations (now known as the Haudenosaunee, or People of the Longhouse) to found permanent communities and gave them the leisure time to develop complex systems of government based on democratic principles.

The Huron-Wendat, for example, had a three-tier political system, consisting of village councils, tribal councils and the confederacy council. All councils made decisions on a consensus basis, with discussions often going late into the night until everyone reached agreement.

On the Plains, the individual migratory groups, each with their own chief, assembled during the summer months for spiritual ceremonies, dances, feasts and communal hunts. Even though each group was fiercely independent, Plains First Nations had military societies that carried out functions such as policing, regulating life in camp and on the march, and organizing defences.

The social organization of several Plains First Nations was influenced by their neighbours and trading partners – the First Nations of the Pacific Coast. As a result, the Dakelh-ne (Carrier), Tahltan and Ts'ilh'got'in (Chilcotin) adopted the stratified social systems of the Pacific Coast Nations, which included nobles, commoners and slaves.

In addition to these three distinct social orders, Pacific Coast First Nations had a well-defined aristocratic class that was regarded as superior by birth. The basic social unit for all First Nations in this part of the country was the extended family (lineage) whose members claimed descent from a common ancestor. Most lineages had their own crests, featuring representations of animal or supernatural beings that were believed to be their founders. The most famous method of crest display was the totem pole consisting of all the ancestral symbols that belonged to a lineage.

The people of the Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins lived in a vast homeland where game animals were very scarce and the winters were long and severe. As was true of most First Nations across the country, those of the Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins were primarily occupied with day-to-day survival. As such, First Nations were divided into several independent groups made up of different family units who worked together. Each group hunted a separate territory, with individual boundaries defined by tradition and use. A group leader was selected according to the group's needs at a particular time. On a caribou hunt, for example, the most proficient hunter would be chosen as leader.

Food Resources

All First Nations across the country hunted and gathered plants for both food and medicinal purposes. The actual percentage of meat, fish and plants in any First Nation's diet depended on what was available in the local environment.

The Woodland First Nations (and all First Nations in the northern regions) hunted game animals with spears and bows and arrows. These First Nations also used traps and snares – a type of noose that caught the animal by the neck or leg. Northern hunters, such as the Gwich'in, built elaborate routing fences with stakes and brush. The Gwich'in used these fences to stampede animals into the area where snares had been set to trap them. To provide for times of hardship, the people dried large stores of meat, fish and berries during the summer. During the winter, to keep frozen meat safe from animals such as the wolverine, some First Nations of the Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins stored their food high in a tree with its trunk peeled of bark.

Even though the Haudenosaunee had plenty of meat, fish and fowl available to them in the wild, they lived mainly on their own crops – corn, beans and squash, which were called "The Three Sisters." The men cleared the land for planting, chopping down trees and cutting the brush, while the women planted, tended and harvested the crops. After about 10 years, when the land became exhausted, the people would relocate and clear new fertile fields.

Because the buffalo was the main object of their hunt, Plains First Nations had a hunting culture that was highly developed over thousands of years. Communal hunts took place in June, July and August when the buffalo were fat, their meat prime and their hides easily dressed.

A single buffalo provided a lot of meat, with bulls averaging about 700 kilograms. Eaten fresh, the meat was roasted on a spit or boiled in a skin bag with hot stones, a process that produced a rich, nutritious soup. Just as common was the dried buffalo meat known as jerky, which could be stored for a long time in rawhide bags. Women also prepared high-protein pemmican – dried meat pounded into a powder, which was then mixed with hot, melted buffalo fat and berries. A hunter could easily carry this valuable food stuff in a small leather bag. Pemmican later became a staple in the diet of fur traders and voyageurs.

Salmon was the primary food source for the First Nations of the Plateau. Even the Tahltan hunters of the north assembled each spring at the fishing places to await the arrival of the first salmon. People used dip nets and built weirs in the shallows of swift waters to trap schools of fish. Of the thousands of salmon caught each year, a very small proportion was eaten fresh. The remainder was cleaned, smoked and stored for winter in underground pits lined with birch bark. Wild vegetable foods – chiefly roots and berries – also formed an important part of the diet of the Plateau First Nations, particularly the Interior Salish.

The vast food resources of the ocean – salmon, shellfish, octopus, herring, crabs, whale and seaweed – made it possible for Pacific Coast First Nations to settle in permanent locations. Unlike the Haudenosaunee who relocated every 10 years or so, Pacific Coast First Nations usually built permanent villages. Some village sites show evidence of occupation for more than 4,000 years. Like Plateau First Nations, those of the Pacific Coast dried most of their salmon in smokehouses so that it could be stored and eaten later. Fish oil also played an important part in people's diet, serving as a condiment with dried fish during the winter months. A highly valued source of oil was eulachon, a type of smelt.

The Coast Tsimshian, Haida and Nuu-chah-nulth all hunted sea lion and sea otter, going out into the ocean with harpoons in slim dugout canoes. However, the most spectacular of all marine hunts was the Nuu-chah-nulth's pursuit of the whale. Nuu-chah-nulth whaling canoes were large enough for a crew of eight and the harpooner, who was armed with a harpoon of yew wood about four metres long and sat directly behind the prow.

Homes

Because of their migratory way of life, First Nations of the Woodland, Plains and Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins all built homes that were either portable or easily erected from materials found in their immediate environments. Woodland and northern peoples' homes were essentially a framework of poles covered with bark, woven rush mats or caribou skin, called tipis.

Plains First Nations' tipi poles were usually made from long slender pine trees. These were highly valued because replacements were not easy to find on the Prairies. The average tipi cover consisted of 12 buffalo hides stitched together. To prevent drafts and to provide interior ventilation, an inner wall of skins about two metres high was often fastened to the poles on the inside. Women made, erected and owned the tipis.

Unlike nomadic First Nations, the Haudenosaunee had relatively permanent villages. The longhouse was the most striking feature in an Haudenosaunee village. This structure consisted of an inverted U shape made of poles, which were then covered with slabs of bark. Longhouses were usually about 10 metres wide, 10 metres high and 25 metres long. Each longhouse was headed by a powerful matriarch who oversaw her extended family's day-to-day affairs.

Among First Nations of the Plateau, the subterranean homes of the Interior Salish were unlike those of other First Nations in the country. The Interior Salish dug a pit, usually about two metres deep and from six to twelve metres wide, in well-drained soil, typically near a river. This location meant that clean water, fish and a means of transport were all readily accessible. The Interior Salish then covered the pit with a framework of poles and insulated this dwelling with spruce boughs and earth that was removed from the pit. An opening approximately 1.25 metres square was left at the top and served as both the doorway and smoke-hole. People entered the house with the help of steps carved into a sturdy, slanting log, the top of which protruded out of the opening of the pit house.

Massive forests of red cedar along the Pacific Coast allowed the First Nations who lived in this part of the country to build huge homes. Excellent carpenters, these First Nations used chisels made of stone or shell and stone hammers to split the soft, straight-grained cedar into wide planks. One of the largest traditional homes ever recorded from the pre-contact era was in a Coast Salish village. It was 170 metres long and 20 metres wide. Because Pacific Coast houses were so large, they could accommodate several families, each with its own separate living area and hearth.

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Spiritual Beliefs

All First Nations believed that their values and traditions were gifts from the Creator. One of the most important and most common teachings was that people should live in harmony with the natural world and all it contained.

In oral stories and legends that Elders passed from one generation to another, First Nations children learned how the world came into being and that they were a part of the whole of creation. People gave thanks to everything in nature, upon which they depended for survival and development as individuals and as members of their communities. First Nations treated all objects in their environment – whether animate or inanimate – with the utmost respect.

This deep respect that First Nations cultivated for every thing and every process in the natural world was reflected in songs, dances, festivals and ceremonies. Among the Woodland First Nations, for example, a hunter would talk or sing to a bear before it died, thanking the animal for providing the hunter and his family with much-needed food.

In keeping with their farming culture, the Haudenosaunee held six to eight festivals a year relating to the cultivation of the soil and ripening of fruits and berries. There was a seven-day festival to give thanks when corn was planted, for example, and another when it was green. A third festival was held when corn was harvested.

First Nations of the Pacific Coast had many rituals to give thanks and celebrate the annual salmon run. These rituals included a welcoming ceremony and offerings to the first salmon of the year.

For the principles that guided their day-to-day conduct, many First Nations shared value systems similar to the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishnaabe peoples. These teachings stressed Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility and Truth as the values that enable people to live in a way that promotes harmony and balance with everyone and everything in creation.

Source: Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Government of Canada, *First Nations in Canada: Part 1 – Early First Nations: The Six Main Geographical Groups*. Retrieved from <www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1307460755710/1307460872523#chp1>