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Seminar Paper

America is a land of diversity. We have people of various cultures that are descendants of immigrants from all over the world. However, the Native people of the Americas are often forgotten. The Native Americans have been living in the Americas longer than any other group of people. Their history is the oldest history of our nation, so it is important not to be ignorant toward the Native American culture. In Native American Culture and Governance, HIST 403, we have examined the history, culture and governance of the Native American people so as to gain a better understanding of their rich culture. Although I already had a basic understanding of Native American culture, this class has helped me to learn more about the culture and history of Native American tribes in the Midwest.

I have always had a fascination with Native American culture, so I was familiar with many of the basic concepts presented in this class. However, I still found it to be very interesting. I was particularly intrigued by the diversity of the different tribes across the Americas. This diversity was created by the type of environment that the different tribes settled in because the environment was a major influence on the food supply. Where the tribe got its food was a major determinant in its lifestyle. For some, like the Iroquois, farming was a major part of their culture and food supply because the land was good for farming, but others, like the Abenaki of Northern New England, got their food from a variety of sources based on season and had a much more mobile lifestyle. The different languages that developed in the tribes also helped create distinctions between the tribes. Some tribes spoke the same language or similar dialects of the same language, while others spoke languages that were very different than all those around them.

Even in Minnesota, which has a relatively uniform environment, there is a surprising amount of diversity. There are two distinct Native American cultures within Minnesota: the Dakota and the Chippewa. The Chippewa tend to live in the north, while the Dakota occupy southern Minnesota. There are many different types of Dakota. The specific tribe in Minnesota is the Santee Dakota, which can be divided into four smaller groups: Sisseton, Wahpeton, Wahpekute and Mdewakanton. Although I had heard many of these names before I never had a full understanding of how they actually related to each other. I was amazed that there are so many divisions under just the Dakota.

After gaining a better understanding of the various tribes of the Americas and Minnesota we moved on to examine relations between the Native Americans and the Europeans. Relations depended greatly on how the Europeans treated the Native Americans. The French, for example, generally had good relationships with the Native Americans and even frequently intermarried with them. The British, on the other hand, were more interested in exploiting the land than creating good relationships with the native tribes. Some Europeans did initially try to work with the Native Americans, trading with them and making treaties to gain land, but as promises went unfulfilled distrust grew between the two groups. As the years went by, relations between the British and the Native Americans deteriorated into various conflicts. By the 1600s these conflicts had grown into small wars, including the Pequot and King Philips Wars. Most of the conflict was instigated by land claims. As the British sought to push further into North America, the Native Americans fought to maintain their land. However, the United States army was often too strong and many tribes like the Cherokee were forced onto reservations in the West.

In Minnesota, the defining conflict was the Dakota War of 1862. I had never heard of this war before this class, but I had heard of some of the results. By reading *The Dakota War of 1862: Minnesota’s Other Civil War,* I was able to gain an understanding of what occurred. It began with a small group of Dakota, who shot and killed several white settlers and eventually the conflict spread throughout Minnesota. It was a true tragedy on both sides; hundreds of settlers and Dakota were killed. It was particularly interesting to study the Dakota War because many of the events of the war occurred not far from Mankato. One of these was the Battle of New Ulm. New Ulm was attacked twice by the Dakota, but the townspeople were able to escape in the end. Although I have never been to New Ulm, I know that it is very close to Mankato, so reading about the battles that occurred there was truly mind-opening. In addition, after the war had ended, the United States government sought to punish the Dakota who had committed war crimes during the conflict. President Abraham Lincoln ended up approving only thirty-nine of the original 300 plus Dakota, who were supposed to be executed. Thirty-eight of them were executed in downtown Mankato. Knowing that something that drastic and historical happened so close to where I now live is truly amazing to me. I have even been down by the memorial of the thirty-eight Dakota warriors.

Two things really strike me about the thirty-eight Dakota warriors who were executed. First, it puts the cruelty of the United States against the Native Americans into perspective. Although most of those executed had committed war crimes, it was still a drastic measure. Second, when I attended the Mahkato Wacipi, there was a large ceremony honoring those warriors. I was impressed not just with the reverence that the Dakota still have for those warriors, but also that they do not hold it against the whites. People of all backgrounds are welcome to the powwow. The Dakota want to teach their culture to other people so that they will understand them better.

As a kinesthetic learner, I learned the most through the activities that we did in class. First, was the Mahkato Wacipi, which I actually attended prior to this class. I was able to write another paper on my experiences and compare the powwow to those of other Native American tribes. By actually immersing myself in the Native American culture, I was able to gain a greater respect for their culture and a deeper fascination with their traditions. One of my favorite parts of the actual class was examining and discussing the artifacts. Having a hands-on experience with artifacts can help to solidify your understanding of a culture. I loved being able to examine artifacts that had actually been made and used by Native Americans in their everyday life.

As a future teacher, I can apply many of the concepts learned in this class in the future. First, I now have a better understanding of the learning styles of Native Americans. Before learning how we differ both through lecture and the learning styles paper, I had not considered that Native Americans would differ significantly from Europeans in their learning styles. Now that I understand that Native Americans rely much more on visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles, I will be more prepared to teach Native American students in my class. In addition, I plan to have my middle school endorsement in Social Studies, which means that I will cover some of the same material that was presented in this class when I teach. Now that I have covered this material in more depth, I will be better prepared to teach my future students about Native Americans.

I have thoroughly enjoyed Native American Culture and Governance. As I previously mentioned, I have always had a fascination with Native American culture. By going even more in depth and examining the nuances of Native American history and culture I have renewed my interest in native culture. We have examined the culture, conflicts, and artifacts of Native American culture in order to develop a greater understanding of their culture. Examining other cultures can help us to become less ethnocentric and develop a greater appreciation of other cultures as well as helping us to better understand our past.