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The Cultural Implications of European Disease on New World Populations: With Primary Focus on the Abenaki, Powhatan, and Taino Groups.

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ABSTRACT

The European discoverers brought with them weapons and foreign inventions which Native Americans had never seen. Unknowingly, they also brought more fatal devices from Europe, diseases. All native populations suffered from a variety of these European diseases, mostly influenza, smallpox, and measles. Some researchers speculate that these diseases may have been transmitted to other adjacent tribes by way of long-standing trade routes. Since Native Americans and their ancestors' immune systems were never equipped to handle European infections, the diseases annihilated millions before they ever saw the "pale faced" explorers. In what is now both present-day North and South America, men, women, and children suffered horrible sicknesses which oftentimes resulted in their deaths. With death tolls reaching such grievous numbers, many tribes were unable to sustain their traditional ways of life. These horrific series of events forever altered the course of global human history. The suffering and loss of cultural identity resulting from the introduction of European diseases caused irreversible changes in the lives and well being of the Abenaki, Powhatan, and Taino peoples.

The colonization of the Americas began in the late 15th century, leaving a substantial impact on global human society, both culturally and biologically. Although colonization had many benefits, the consequences were horrendous. By the end of the 19th century, millions of Native Americans were dead, displaced, or had been forced to assimilate into Western culture. Most of the Amerindians who initially died were not killed by European weapons or other genocidal means, but suffered from diseases unknowingly carried by white invaders. Diseases, mainly smallpox and measles, spread throughout communities that had no immunity, and decimated entire aboriginal populations whose members had come into contact with carriers. Europeans had no knowledge that they carried pathogens when making their journeys across the Atlantic; nonetheless, their diseases wiped out various populations, some even before they ever saw actual Europeans. The devastation that resulted from disease helped facilitate the European colonization of the Americas. Native American groups such as the Abenaki, Powhatan, and Taino faced catastrophic disease epidemics, allowing European colonists to easily disassemble these groups and eradicate their cultural identity.

Indigenous traditions across the Americas, although varying greatly, contained many of the same organizational attributes. Evidence shows that the Abenaki, Powhatan, and Taino had similarly structured societies. Many of these groups were organized as band-level structured units consisting of a few families working together. Collectively, these groups formed tribes and dominant confederacies (Calloway 17, Rouse 9, Feest 24). In the case of the Powhatan, band-level villages amounted to approximately 30 at the time of contact, and all bands met in order to gather food or hunt, but were under the collective leadership of a single paramount chief (Feest 24, Powhatan 1). Most aboriginal groups seemed to have been thriving when the Europeans arrived. The Taino people were experiencing a prosperous time, which historians define “as a period of cultural accomplishment”(Flores 11). Their florescence occurred “from 1200-1490 CE – right before the first contact with Europeans” (Flores 11). Following the spread of European disease, almost all of those persons having knowledge of

important cultural traditions died. With such devastating population decline, these traditional cultures struggled to survive.

The origins of diseases introduced to the Americans arose from the countless epidemics that had struck European and African populations decades earlier. While these contagions wiped out countless Europeans, their losses pale in comparison to the death toll of the Amerindians. It was primarily “smallpox and measles” that devastated native populations, and “were two of the most deadly epidemic diseases” (Cook 96). The Native American populations had no defense against them. “Both [smallpox and measles] had afflicted Europeans and Africans for generations; they were endemic in Southern Europe and North Africa and were predominantly childhood diseases” (Cook 96). Therefore, almost all Europeans and Africans were exposed to both diseases prior to contact with Native Americans. Undoubtedly, Native Americans, having no prior ancestral experience dealing with these diseases, were more likely to be killed after coming into contact with these European ailments.

Although the isolation of Amerindian populations led to immense diversity within individual cultures and traditions, it also facilitated the collapse of those native populations. One scholar has argued, “among the major divisions of the species homo sapiens, with possible exception of the Australian aborigine, the American Indian probably had the dangerous privilege of [the] longest isolation from the rest of mankind” (Crosby 37). Others have suggested that Amerindians are the greatest example of the ‘virgin soil’ theory. Thus, “once European (and African) disease pathogens reached the virgin soil of the Americans they took hold; different diseases interacted to dramatically reduce population levels and prevent the recovery of these levels” (Hays 85). The aboriginal populations of the Americas could never have prepared for this epidemic that would eventually have devastating consequences for them.

European maladies from smallpox to measles caused numerous epidemics around the New World. “Widespread consensus holds that the population of the American continents may have fallen by 90 percent between the beginning and end of the 16th century, an unparalleled demographic

catastrophe” (Hays 86). Such immense loss of life led to the devastation of cultural identity, evident within all current Native American populations. Many groups had adapted various routines to ensure survival within their region. After contact, sustaining their villages and groups became difficult, since so many had perished. Such rapid population decline forced many to migrate in search of new territory.

The Taino

Among the many groups affected by the European diseases, the Taino were the first to experience these epidemics, having been the first people to greet European explorers upon their arrival to the Caribbean in 1492. Although there was no mention of disease within the first couple of decades of contact, small instances were likely to have occurred. One authority has noted that, “Even before smallpox’s arrival the native populations of the Caribbean had been dramatically reduced perhaps to levels of ‘nearing extinction’” (Hays 82). The exact causes of these widespread deaths remain unknown, but this would only signal the beginning of an era marked by epidemics. One of the first recorded epidemics in the Americas took place within the Taino population. “A smallpox epidemic in Hispaniola in 1520 is thought to have wiped out two-thirds of the remaining Tainos” (Ferguson 36). Although the population numbers vary, it is clear that a majority of the Taino population was wiped out by this initial smallpox outbreak. A principal cause of this massive disease outbreak may have come from the conditions forced on the Tainos by their European colonizers. The Taino “had been concentrated in fewer and more crowded settlements, which in effect spread contagion more quickly” (Hays 82). With such close living conditions, Taino settlements would have been more susceptible to diseases.

Another cause of the rapid spread of disease was the *encomiendas*. The *encomienda* was a system that allowed Europeans, particularly the Spanish, to exploit the Taino as slave laborers. It is documented that the Europeans forced the Taino people to work continuously until their death. “The *encomiendas* subjected entire communities to long, sometimes permanent, periods of forced hardship and labor. Malnutrition and disease proliferated as villagers were unable

to plant or harvest crops” (Ferguson 36). The combination of disease and forced labor *encomiendas* utterly obliterated the Taino population. Not long after the Taino population of Hispaniola was infected, did they unknowingly spread these diseases. Since the Taino population of Hispaniola did extensive trading with other Caribbean Taino populations, the transfer of disease was swift (Flores 11). There is data documenting that “Puerto Rican Tainos visited their counterparts in Hispaniola on a daily basis” (Flores 11). With such extensive trade and travel between the two islands it would have only taken one individual’s contact, with a group not yet infected, to spread a contagious disease. This suggests that populations that had not encountered Europeans still contracted the diseases, although from their fellow aboriginals.

The Abenaki

Unlike the Taino, the Abenaki had previous knowledge of Europeans. It is speculated that the Abenaki had seen or heard rumors about the Vikings who landed in 1000 CE on the Eastern coast of North America (Calloway 41). However, it was not until the arrival of the French and English at the beginning of the 17th century that diseases took their toll on this native population. One of the first outbreaks of smallpox in North America was recorded to have occurred among the Abenaki peoples residing in modern-day New England. This “massive outbreak of either smallpox or the plague (historians are still divided) raged among the tribes from 1616 to 1619” (Calloway 45). This epidemic left whole villages abandoned, as Indians “fled their homes” leaving many areas filled with corpses (Calloway 45). Primarily, large numbers of natives migrated from their homelands and villages because they did not want to remain in an area where death was so prevalent. Some areas were believed to have “more than 75 percent” of the population annihilated from European disease (Calloway 45).

Such staggering figures illustrate why so many Amerindian populations were unable to carry on their traditional ways of life; not only was there a significant depletion within all Native American populations, but many elders, the knowledge keepers, were lost. With such a rapid depletion after contact, the Abenaki, like other groups, were not able to restore their population to their

original numbers. Scholars argue that “diseases present in a population affect fertility by delaying marriage, lowering sexual desire, and producing coital inability, conceptive failure and pregnancy loss” (Thornton 54). As fertility dropped, fewer children were conceived, and cultural traditions had fewer carriers. Ultimately, this resulted in the loss of cultural identity. Moreover, traditional Amerindian societies were based on systems that utilized every individual to gather resources. With this grave loss of population, many bands were forced to merge with other groups in order to survive. “By the time English soldiers and settlers began to invade their lands, the Abenaki had already suffered great losses from the viral invasion” (Calloway 45). The impact of European contagions continued to haunt the Abenaki long after initial contact. For example, while survivors traded native furs and goods for European goods, they unknowingly contracted European diseases (Calloway 46). Other peoples living in the Northeast were likewise devastated by European diseases; even though, in some cases, they never came into contact with these new European settlers.

The Powhatan

The Powhatan tribes, otherwise known as the Powhatan Confederacy, had substantial encounters with Europeans, especially the English. Historically, the Powhatan tribes occupied a large portion of present day Virginia, and had considerable interaction with the colonists of Jamestown. Like the Abenaki and the Taino discussed previously, the Powhatan tribes were primarily hunting and gathering societies, but also maintained gardens. They depended on all individuals of the collective villages to contribute labor and food resources to benefit all members of the confederacy. For example, women traditionally tended to the weeding and planting of crops, while men hunted (Feest 22). This way of life had existed for hundreds of years and made possible the survival of a significant population, sustaining their traditional way of life. Unfortunately, Jamestown was incredibly close to the Powhatan tribal lands. Thus, infection was inevitable. Since “both [smallpox and measles] are airborne infections, [they] can spread easily and quickly, especially in crowded settlements” (Hays 88). As

interaction between the Powhatan and English increased, the likelihood of an epidemic disaster grew exponentially.

Although no specific account exists, it is relatively easy to find reference to the devastation disease had on their groups. One such account records the fact that “disease was daily decimating [Powhatan’s] people” (Powhatan 1). Other accounts state that “the English had been steadily growing in population while the Powhatan Indians had been decimated ... by European disease” (Opechancanough 1). At this time, many Europeans viewed the death of Native Americans as God’s decree that this land was theirs for the taking. The English, especially, “thanked God for helping them get rid of the unbelievers” (Driver 480). Europeans viewed the death of so many natives as their God’s claim that the Americas were for Europeans’ settlement and colonization. Therefore, it is not surprising that future colonists used this belief to further their claims for westward expansion into Native American lands.

Conclusion

The lasting effect of this devastating annihilation of Native Americans can be presently seen. “Many demographers suggest that diseases introduced by whites account for much of the change” within the aboriginal communities of America (Hirschfelder 173). Before contact with Europeans, the Americas were populated with millions of Native Americans. These Native American “populations declined to ratios [of only] 1/20 or 1/25 of their original size” (Thornton 23). The depletion of Native American populations suggests that cultures not historically recorded had most likely also been lost, partially due to colonization, but mainly due to European disease. These “foreign pathogens were active[ly] winnowing the people more quickly even than a sword could, and certainly much more silently and effectively” (Cook 95). The cruel reality of the number of lives lost is outrageous when we consider how many natives were present at the time of contact. These “diseases did not merely spread among American Indians, kill them and then disappear. On the contrary, they came, spread, and killed again and again and again” (Thornton 45). European

pathogens created a string of epidemics in the Americas, which accounted for the multitudes of documented deaths.

The majority of tribes making up the Powhatan Confederacy had vanished by the mid 19th century (Feest 75). Those who remained, no longer spoke their language and dressed in European styled clothing (Feest 75). This loss of culture occurred in almost every village, band, or group. The Abenaki of New England faced equally severe circumstances. After suffering many years of reoccurring epidemics decimating their populations, and the consequences of European colonization, the Abenaki were forced to migrate to Canada (Calloway 63). Essentially, their way of life had been destroyed because they no longer had the population to ensure their survival. The Abenaki were also obliged to make an economic change. Most were compelled to stop hunting and fishing as they traditionally had done, and instead began crafting goods to sell, in order to purchase needed resources from Europeans (Calloway 64). Depopulation resulting from disease was a significant event leading to the discontinuation of the traditional lives of Native American groups.

It can be argued that the most substantial and long-lasting global impact of European disease was that experienced by the Taino populations. Since the Spanish colonizers were predominantly men, intermarriage was prominent between the Spanish colonizers, Taino, and African slaves. Today the Caribbean populations, particularly those in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, view themselves as descendants of earlier Taino populations (Flores 3). Certainly, the creation of this distinct present-day Caribbean population would have been impossible without the initial depopulation caused by disease. "As recently as the late 1990's and early 2000's, many prominent Caribbean and Latin American historians maintained that the ethnic contributions of the Taino and other indigenous groups were significant when compared to the European and African genetic inheritance in present-day" Caribbean populations (Flores 7). Again, it is worth reiterating that these prominent global changes were predominantly the result of introducing European diseases into Native American populations.

In closing, throughout human history, the colonization and conquest of individuals has increasingly shaped our world and our societies. The largest and most drastic change resulting from the conquests was the exchange of viruses and bacteria, forever altering human history. Although European diseases made possible the rise of our modern day societies, it also caused the destruction of Native American societies and their unique cultural identities. Without the introduction of European diseases, could Amerindians have been able to keep their traditions and cultures alive? Although we will never know for sure, it can be argued that European diseases contributed significantly to the ultimate decline of the Native populations of the Americas.

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