

Rethinking Columbus Day:

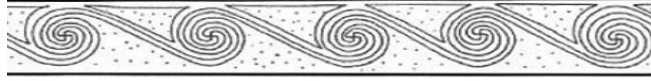
How Native Americans shaped our world

October 12, 2014 will mark the 522nd anniversary of Columbus and his exploration of the Americas. Columbus opened the door to the interaction between Native Americans and the long line of Europeans that they would encounter and eventually live with. In this month's Iti Fabvssa we will take a different approach to Columbus Day and examine how Native Americans helped shape not only America but the world.

Before the arrival of Columbus on the islands of the Caribbean, Native Americans had been living on the lands of what would become North, Central and South America for thousands of years. In fact, Choctaw oral traditions place Choctaws in North America over 10,000 years ago. During that time, Native Americans established villages, cities, and hunting grounds. They also developed agricultural and textile industries, and created vast trade networks. By the time of Columbus's arrival America had a population of over 100,000,000 people. This population boasted many distinct cultures and societies that were unprecedented to that of Europe.

During the thousands of years leading up to the arrival of Columbus and other European explorers, Native Americans were making great advances in architecture and the establishment of not only villages but also towns. Today we can still see the grandeur and beauty of these cities from the Mayan ruins in Mexico and Central America, the remains of the Incan civilization in South America, and the remains of the mound structures and their surrounding villages, like that of the Choctaws, in North America. Native Americans were able to create not only grand and beautiful villages and cities, but they also created their villages and cities to survive and thrive in their unique environments. In South America for example, the Incas were able to create buildings and homes that could survive earthquakes (Weatherford 1988, 2010:284). This Native American approach to architecture, with its "sturdy angles, straight lines, and parallels" eventually caught on during the early settlement of America (Weatherford 1988, 2010:286,290-291).

While Columbus did not have interactions with the Native Americans of the present day United States, he did experience interactions with those living in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. During his time in the Americas Columbus encountered many different types of land, plants, and food, all of which he claimed for the Spanish Crown. The major resource that he encountered came in the form of gold and silver. For hundreds of years Tribes had accessed the gold found on their lands and turned it into decorative items such as jewelry. Upon encountering Natives Columbus took notice of their gold ornaments and jewelry and



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began his quest for the source of these riches. Once found, the gold was gathered and sent back to Europe. Columbus's discovery of gold opened the doorway for the European explorers that would begin pouring into this new world.

Upon reaching South America and Mexico, the Spanish discovered the massive quantities of silver that the lands held. As the primary material desired to make monetary coins the extraction and shipment of silver became just as important as that of the gold that had been previously discovered. Suddenly Europe experienced a rush of wealth from the gold and silver being imported from the Americas. This new found wealth created a new social and monetary system and brought Europe to the forefront of international power (Weatherford 1988, 2010:16-21). Of course the great demand of gold and silver created the need for a large workforce. Many Natives were taken as slaves and forced to work in this new venture. Eventually Europeans moved on from gold and silver and into new forms of trade involving Native products such as tobacco, cotton, and various types of food.

Food bearing plants of the Americas became a vital commodity of the European world. It is believed that Native Americans cultivated over three hundred food crops and gave the world three-fifths of the crops now in cultivation (Weatherford 1988, 2010:93). The types of plants and food taken from the Americas and imported into Europe include: potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, beans, squash, peanuts, sunflowers, tomatoes, peppers, chocolate and vanilla. In addition to changing the types of food available to Europe, Native foods also changed the cuisine. The introduction of these Native foods enabled the people of Europe and Asia to add new tastes, textures, and colors to their dishes. One of the best examples of how Native foods changed world cuisine can be illustrated by Italian cuisine. Today when we think of Italian cuisine one of the first things that comes to mind is tomato or spaghetti sauce, but before the introduction of Native foods there were no tomatoes to make a sauce with. Without the introduction of this Native food we wouldn't be able to enjoy spaghetti, lasagna or any of the other Italian dishes that we eat today.

Native American food, however, did more than just provide variety to the European diet. Potatoes provided more nutrition than

the traditional grains of Europe and required less work to cultivate and produce (Weatherford 1988, 2010:84-88). Corn, while not as popular with the people of Europe as was the potato, was found to be a great food source for animals. This reliable food source for animal feed increased the population of animals in Europe which increased the available sources of protein such as meat, cheese, milk and eggs (Weatherford 1988, 2010:95). Out of these crops potatoes and corn became the staple crops that would lead to a population boom in Europe. This population boom lead not only to the large number of Europeans that would eventually colonize America, but also to the Industrial Revolution.

Due to the large increase in population that Europe experienced during the years after the introduction of Native American plants and food, the demand for the production of these and other Native American products such as cotton, dye, rubber, chocolate, and vanilla, greatly increased. In order to keep up with the demand of these products, Europe needed to establish a better form of production than just the limited quantities that small villages could produce. It was the introduction of products that Native Americans had been producing and using for thousands of years that inspired Europe to create the factories, machines, and workforce that we would come to know during the Industrial Revolution.

The effect of Native Americans on the world can be measured far beyond the trade, monetary systems, agriculture and food that they introduced. In fact, Native Americans can also be credited with providing the basis of the government that we know today. Coming from countries that were ruled by monarchies, Europeans knew little, if anything, about democracy. Upon encountering the Iroquois League, the early American settlers were able to see what a democratic government was, how it worked, and what it could accomplish (Weatherford 1988, 2010:173). Today we see this type of Native based government carried out daily through our leaders at federal, state, and local levels. Without this type of government the lives of all Americans would be vastly different.

The ways that Native Americans have shaped our world are far reaching and innumerable. It is hard to go through our daily routines and not find something that Native Americans haven't had an effect on. This Columbus Day, rather than focusing on Columbus's "discovery of America", we can take a different approach and focus on what Native Americans were able to share with the world.

Weatherford, Jack
2010 [1988] *Indian Givers: How Native Americans Transformed the World*. Three Rivers Press, New York.