Chapter 1: Native Peoples of America

American history began more than ten thousand years before the age of exploration. Historians believe two main theories about the origins of the first Americans. First: During the first Ice Age (10,500 BCE) a band of Siberian hunters crossed a land bridge into Alaska and then spread out across the Americas. Second: Around 13,000 BCE people came by boat and settled along the Western coast line. These early Americans are known as Paleo- Indians because they lived during the old stone age and were nomadic. This means they followed their food (mammoth and mastodons) and had no permanent villages. These Paleo-Indians would gather at quarries and this lead to encounter, intermarriage among tribes, trade and cultural diffusion.

As the climate changed to become warmer the big game died off and the people started to depend on flora and fauna (small animals). This was known as the Neolithic Age (New) and we see a shift in living styles. Larger groups will live in smaller areas or even established permanent villages. Men’s roles were to hunt and fish and women harvested and prepared wild plants. Around 5000 BCE we saw the Agricultural Revolution and some Native Americans began to farm. Squash, beans and Maize (corn) were known as the “Three sisters” because they were so important to the diet and survival of these early people.

Even though these early people started off similar they began to vary in culture. In Meso-America and South America we saw farming tribes such as the Olmecs (known as the rubber people ☺). They had hereditary rulers that ruled over smaller areas called “Chiefdoms. The Mayans inherited most of the Olmec culture and further developed their calendar which was important for harvesting plants at the right time. The Aztecs also flourished around Mexico City and they grew past a population of 100,000 people. This was because they conquered nearby tribes. They were known for their human sacrifices, floating gardens and temples for the sun god.

Water was scarce in the Southwest so tribes like the Hohokam people built extensive canal system to bring in water. The Anasazi lived in the four corner region of the US and built permanent villages with underground religious centers called Kivas and built their homes in cliffs to protect from invaders. By the 13th century (1200) these cultures had declined and settlements abandoned, probably because of drought. Both men and women did the farming in the Southwest.

In the Eastern Woodlands (land from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean) we saw different tribes experiment with farming and village life. At Poverty Point (LA) 5,000 people built a mound building culture and the Adena continued this with using their mounds as burial sites. This was a reflection of their hierarchy system. Since flooding was common, Natives focused more on works of clay, stone, shell and copper.

Some societies did not farm but instead focused on fishing. These were found along the Pacific Coast. They learned to fish for salmon as well as dry it so they had a surplus that would last all year long. Grinding Acorns into meal was also common and allowed for food storage. This led to the establishment of permanent villages with several hundred people. They engaged in trade and warfare under the leadership of a chief. In the Great Basin and Great Plains area rain was too uncertain so these tribes stayed nomadic and roamed looking for bison, wild berries and nuts. The Eskimos and Aleuts spread from Alaska all the way to Greenland where they came into contact with the Norseman (Man from the North).

By 1500 about 75 million people lived in the Western hemisphere. They made up hundreds of unique small tribes and had different languages and cultures. Even though they were separated, they shared many common traits such as the use of the bow and arrow, ceramic pottery, some religious beliefs such spiritual powers and the use of the medicine man, living in Kinship-based communities where multigenerational families lived together, and communal control of resources were trading and gift giving was common. Among these different tribes we saw cultural diffusion but also a uniqueness amongst each. There was conflict over scarce resources but rarely did a tribe attempt to kill large numbers.