

Fur trade and indigenous societies of hudson bay



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Relations between European settlers and Indigenous peoples of North America was a subject of numerous misconceptions. The earlier stereotypical interpretation of history viewed Indigenous as hostile barbarian tribes who posed a permanent threat to the settlers. When historical discipline took the side of ethnic minorities, the negative influence of white civilization was often exaggerated. In reality, both cultures influenced each other equally while pursuing their own interests. As the hostile relationships and isolationism proved ineffective, they began to build trading relationships, which seemed to be mutually beneficial. The fur trade signified the start of these relationships. But the fur was not the only subject of trade, and the far reaching consequences of these relationships were hard to predict.

Assiniboine and Western Cree lived in the land of great biodiversity. Three types of habitat - woodland, parkland, and grassland - provided all necessary resources for Indigenous. There were two large game species in woodland (woodland caribou and moose), and the great variety of small game species such as marten, otter, muskrat, or beaver. Indigenous valued these animals for their fur, but some of them also were an important source of food. The forested region was also rich in fish and waterfowl. The grassland was rich in small and large game species alike, including antelope, mule deer, red deer, and bison.[1]

The variety of resources depended on seasonal and non-seasonal factors. Irregular fluctuations occurred because of epidemics or short-term changes in climate. Seasonal fluctuations were more predictable but equally difficult to endure. Winter was the hardest period for Indigenous because only large game animals were available, but these were widely scattered across the

area. Seasonal animal migration determined the Indigenous' way of life. Following their game species, they would not remain in the same place for more than three months.

The early years of fur trade saw the severe competition between the English and the French. The fur trade was centered in Hudson Bay. When both parties signed the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, the English received the permanent control of the Bay.[2]As York Factory and Fort Albany became the two leading centers of fur trade in Canada, Indigenous tribes competed for the larger share of trade with European posts. While the competition between Europeans involved only two parties, they both marketed with many small Indigenous tribes who arrived by canoe and on foot. Economic competition exacerbated their relations and often led to armed conflicts. Indigenous also had to adapt to the basic principles of market economy. Hudson's Bay Company invented a basic monetary unit - "made beaver" (MB), the standard value of a prime beaver skin. The value of any other trade item was expressed in made beavers.[3]Because Indigenous were not familiar with the principles of demand and supply, it would be always difficult for a company to make them accept new prices. Soon after, they learned to accept changes and bargain over the amount of traded goods.

Indigenous' demand for trade was extremely inelastic. On average, an Indigenous needed only 70 MB value of goods per year and 30 MB of additional value to "squander at the post." [4]Regardless of the company's demand, he neither could nor wanted to bring more than the amount equivalent to 100 MB. On the first glance, fixed supply and increasing demand were beneficial for the Indigenous' side, but it also had its negative

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effect. With more favorable price conditions, they could bring fewer skins to obtain what they wanted. Thus, they had more free time and more money to spend. Indigenous became susceptible to bad habits: they mostly spent their free time at posts drinking and smoking. The Hudson's Bay Company saw the increasing popularity of brandy among Indigenous as their own advantage. Thus, the company could compensate for the rising fur prices and Indigenous' limited demand for the goods it offered in exchange.[5]

There was another important trading item which changes the lives of Indigenous. Starting from the late XVII century, guns comprised more than half of the trade. Initially, Indigenous used firearms as war weapons, and that would boost the demand for guns in the earlier period of trade. Certain groups hurried to employ the new weapon against their unarmed rivals. Gradually, Indigenous learned to use guns for hunting. Woodland inhabitants were the first to incorporate guns into their hunting practices, which simplified the process of hunting considerably but also increased their dependency on firearms. After a sharp but short increase, the demand for guns turned into a steady decline. A similar pattern of trade intensity was typical for most of the items because Indigenous were not inclined to buy more than they needed.

The fur trade with Europeans gave Indigenous an access to the increasing variety of goods that they could not produce themselves. Apart from guns, they bought blankets and cloth. Their demand for European clothing materials increased not only because of their gradual acculturation. Initially limited resources of the area were depleted due to the higher European demand and the effectiveness of firearms. Indigenous s found it extremely

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difficult (especially in the cold season) to get furs for their clothing. As for alcohol, the demand for rum and brandy steadily increased and was especially high during the periods of intense competition.[6] Various tribes had their preferences: Cree living closest to the Bay were buying cloths and blankets in large quantities while inland groups were buying more tobacco, kettles, hatchets, and guns. Presumably, the pattern of consumption would tell much about a tribe's way of life.

By the beginning of the XIX century, economic relations with Europeans changed migration patterns of Indigenous tribes; south and west became more popular directions than before. The decline in fur and game resources was the most likely reason. It became extremely difficult to survive the winter because natural resources of the parkland area were no longer available. In search for food and shelter, Indigenous arrived at Red River colony, but the migration flow exceeded the colony's need for labor.

Governor Simpson wanted to discourage this movement because he was afraid that northern regions would become depopulated too rapidly and that would affect the fur trade.[7] At the same time, the colony depended on the seasonal demand in farm workers. The colony's administration shared a hope to "civilize" Indigenous migrants by turning them into farmers. They managed to convince some of them to settle down, but most of them were not farmers in the real sense. Unaccustomed to a settled way of life, they would abandon their newly established farms and turn back to hunting. By the end of the century, however, the changing pattern of labor market made it more difficult to earn for a living in the fur trade, so agricultural labor was one of the few alternatives left.

Sylvia Van Kirk's feminist approach opens a new dimension of the fur industry and its influence on both sides. Relations between indigenous peoples and Europeans were not restricted to business issues. Inevitably, the two civilizations were mixed as Indigenous women entered European families and brought their traditions and beliefs with them. Apparently, mixed marriages could prove useful for trade relations. An Indigenous mate could be an interpreter and "an effective agent in addition to the trader's knowledge of Indigenous life." [8] During the earlier periods of the fur trade, the Hudson's Bay Company did not allow Indigenous women to be harbored in the posts. But the Company's policy went against the social and economic realities of the time. Indigenous were frequently employed as food suppliers for the company, so their lives were tied to the posts. In times of scarcity, Indigenous sought food, shelter, and medical help in the posts, and gradually, the communication between the cultures became close enough to change the daily lives of both of them.

Fur trade was a phenomenon that radically changed the ecosystem of Northwest regions of North America and the lives of indigenous peoples. Apart from inexhaustible demand, Europeans brought a new way of market relations and benefits of civilization which changed Indigenous' lives forever: agricultural tools, cloth materials, household items as well as alcohol, cigarettes, and guns. Initially hostile to one another, Europeans and Indigenous managed to build a mutually beneficial trade cooperation. Europeans discovered an efficient supply chain of valuable animal furs while Indians obtained a stable source of living necessities. The conflict of interests revealed itself when the Company's demand for fur increased but

Indigenous' demand for foreign items remained the same. The company had to find a way to persuade their suppliers to expand the delivery, and they found a solution in guns and brandy. Such economic relations had a devastating effect on the Indigenous culture and the local ecosystem. Severe competition between the tribes resulted in frequent conflicts which were often exacerbated with firearms and alcohol. As guns made hunting much easier and Indigenous were glad to increase the amount of supplied goods, the bio-diversity of the region were sharply depleted. Indigenous tribes of the north region found it too difficult to survive, and their lives were increasingly dependent on white civilization.

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[2]. Ibid., 51.

[3]. Ibid., 61.

[4]. Ibid., 70.

[5]. Arthur J. Ray and Donald B. Freeman, *'Give Us Good Measure': A Economic Analysis of Relations between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company before 1763* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1978), 124.

[6] Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 79.

[7]. Ibid., 218.

[8]. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 13.