

## STUDENT HANDOUT: CLANS AND COUNCILS

Native Americans were organized into groups called **tribes**. Tribes were divided into several **clans**. These clans acted as a person's family. Clan members shared property, determined who could marry who, and even determined what work people did. Among the Cherokees, for instance, people in the Blue Clan were often builders, while the men of the Wolf Clan were warriors.

### COUNCILS AND TOWN COUNCILS:

Every town had a **council house**. In Tennessee this was often a round building placed in a ceremonial location near a plaza.

This was a place for the Indians to meet and discuss business. Here members of the tribe would settle arguments among their members, and plan tribal activities such as planting crops and building new structures.

Henry Timberlake was a British soldier who lived with the Cherokees for three months in 1762. This is how he described the council house in Chota:

*It is built in the form of a sugar loaf, and large enough to contain 500 persons, but extremely dark, having, besides the door, which is so narrow that but one at a time can pass, and that after much winding and turning, but one small aperture to let the smoke out, which is so ill contrived, that most of it settles in the roof of the house.*

Among the Chickasaws, the council house was called a mountain house. The houses were described by European explorers

as "raised with wood, and covered over with earth, and has all the appearance of a small mountain at a little distance." The entrance was low and the view from outside was deliberately obstructed. The furnishings in the mountain house consisted of couches or benches around the walls with seating assigned by clan and rank.

Once in the council house, Indians would often smoke a pipe, also called a **peace pipe**. Smoking a peace pipe was an important part of Cherokee negotiations. Europeans, colonists and other Indian tribes were called on to participate. It was part of the Indian beliefs mixing people, ritual and personal commitment. This is how Timberlake described a "peace pipe":

*The bowl of it was of red stone, curiously cut with a knife, it being very soft, though extremely pretty when polished... The stem is about three feet long, finely advanced with porcupine quills, dyed feathers, deer's hair, and such like gaudy trifles.*

## **HOW NATIVE AMERICANS MADE DECISIONS:**

There are not any native Indian documents that explain how 17th and 18th century American Indian politics worked. All we know is from European accounts. These writers may not have understood how the system worked.

Europeans were amazed by what they saw as government in the tribes. Henry Timberlake wrote, "Their government, if I may call it government...has neither laws or power to support it."

Europeans were also surprised to learn that Indian political leaders had no real power to make people obey them. Indians governed themselves by

consensus, persuasion, and influence. There were no written laws.

Men and women led their people because they were able to convince others to follow them. They were leaders who spoke on behalf of the people. They could be removed if they did not fulfill their duties and promises.

Even though there were fewer social rankings among the Indian tribes than in European society, "rank" did exist. Indians wore symbols of their wealth and achievements. The community punished people who claimed honors that they did not earn.

## **HOLDING A MOCK TRIBAL COUNCIL:**

Your goal is to come to a consensus – meaning that everyone is satisfied with the decision.

### **STEPS IN "BUILDING CONSENSUS":**

1. Specify the issue.
2. Brainstorm a list of many possible alternative "courses of action".
3. Decide what criteria you will use to evaluate your choices.
4. Shorten the list to 4 or 5 choices by voting for "your top 5 choices".
5. Carefully discuss each of the remaining choices. (Consider "trade offs", "pros and cons", etc.)
6. If possible, create a comparison chart to compare the choices.
7. Do a "rating vote" to rank the choices 1-5.
8. Look at areas of disagreement, and discuss them further.
9. Vote again, if necessary.
10. Discuss the outcome of the vote. (Has everyone been heard? Can everyone support the decision?)