Lesson One

Video Segment

Opening through Sam Deloria quote
16 minutes

“The people are the story”
Mohegan tradition
Student Learning Objectives

1. Distinguish between fictional representations of the Mohegan Tribe based on James Fenimore Cooper and the reality of the Tribe based on oral tradition and written documentation.

2. Understand the origins and migration of the Mohegan Tribe that brought it to its traditional and historic tribal lands in Connecticut. Compare those stories to other theories on the origins and migration of Native people.

3. Understand and apply the ways of knowing used by American Indian tribes to document and preserve their history and heritage.

4. Describe the relationship between Uncas and Sassacus and the causes for the separation of the Pequot/Mohegan tribe.

5. Develop a time frame and map for the interaction of the Mohegans and the colonists in Connecticut.

Background Study

Reading One: James Fenimore Cooper’s image of Uncas and the Mohegan Tribe.

Read chapters one through three of The Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Cooper. (available at libraries and bookstores, and on line at www.underthesun.cc/Classics/Cooper/mohicans1.html). Consider these questions about this reading:

1. Why did Cooper choose to begin each chapter of the novel with a quote by William Shakespeare? When did Shakespeare live? What was his impression of distant lands and seas? Why might Cooper’s link to Shakespeare influence the reader?

2. What is the time period for Cooper’s novel?

3. Where does Cooper locate the events in his novel? What was the physical environment? What were the conditions under which the colonists and Native people lived at the time?

4. Create a list of physical, social and cultural characteristics that Cooper attributes to American Indians in general, and the Mohegan Tribe in particular. Describe Cooper’s attitude and beliefs about American Indians and the Mohegan Tribe.

5. Create a list of the personal characteristics of Cooper’s fictional Uncas. How does he relate to his father, to others of his tribe, to the English colonists?

Reading Two: Origins of a People

Prevailing scientific opinion in the United States is that American Indians arrived in North and South America over a land bridge between present-day Russia and Alaska from 12,000 to 30,000 years ago. This is known as the Bering Straits theory. The collective oral histories and creation stories of the Native peoples of America, however, are extremely detailed and consistent, and they make no mention of migration over such a land bridge.

As more evidence is uncovered, the land-bridge theory is constantly open to new challenges. What is the actual scientific evidence that there was a land bridge in this area at that time? What is the evidence that people migrated over such a bridge? Were there people on the continent long before this time? Were there many waves of immigrants, and were the people who came in these different waves of the same racial and cultural origins? Recent evidence suggests that there may have been immigrations to the “New World” at different locations on the Atlantic coast of North America and the Pacific coast of South America. But were there already people here to greet them? Native people continue to assert that they were not migrants from some other continent, but originated on the North and South American continents.

In God Is Red, and Evolution, Creationism and Other Myths, Lakota philosopher, Vine Deloria, Jr., argues that the migration theories of those scientists trained in Western European intellectual traditions reflect a limited understanding of reality. He documents similarities in origin stories of Native peoples throughout the world and suggests theorists should start with these commonalities and move towards exploring entirely new scientific models. Deloria also suggests that the origin stories of Native peoples in the Americas are most importantly describing the creation of the Tribe as a recognizable communal group.

Archaeology, anthropology and geography do confirm a critical element in the origin stories of the Algonquian peoples, of which the Mohegan Tribe is a part. That is, the Algonquian originated far to the west and north of the Great Lakes, and over a long period of time moved into a vast area that covers the northeast region of Canada and
the United States. There is archaeological evidence that organized Algonquian tribes had settled in New England more than 10,000 years ago. For at least 5,000 years they lived in agricultural communities. These Eastern Algonquian brought with them evidence of their migration and their extensive trade with Native peoples throughout the America’s, including corn and other agricultural products, tools, pottery, shell work, and language elements. Kathleen A. Hunter, adapted from The Native Americans of Connecticut: Holding On and Moving Forward, Connecticut State Department of Education Teacher Resource Guide, Hartford, Connecticut, 2000.

Discussion

§ Cooper’s Last of the Mohicans

"...this image of the white man with the faithful Indian by his side continued on down through movies, and television right to the present day. It’s one of the most popular images in the American imagination, even though beginning with Uncas himself it is a false image."

Joseph Bruchac, Abenaki author and storyteller

1. Compare and contrast notes on the study questions for Cooper’s novel, and what students have learned from the video. What factual errors about location, dates, and historic events does Cooper make? How does this cue the reader to the fictional presentation of the Mohegan Tribe and Uncas?

2. Explore the impact on contemporary American Indians of movies based on Cooper’s novel. As presented in the video, how might these movies have improved the image of the American Indian and the Mohegan Tribe in the 20th century? How might the movies have denigrated or falsified the image?

§ Origin of the Mohegan Tribe

"...and there’s one story that was told to us that when they arrived in what’s now Connecticut They must have disrupted some of the groups that were in the area because they called them invaders, Pequot, and that’s where you get the name Pequot."

Gladys Tantaquidgeon, Mohegan Medicine Woman

1. Locate maps of the origins of American Indian tribes in northeastern North America, and the current location of the Mohegan Tribe in Connecticut from libraries or online (www.kstrom.net, www.thebearbyte.com). Using the maps and Gladys Tantaquidgeon’s account of the origins and migration of the Mohegan people to Connecticut, work with students to understand key concepts of the origins of the Mohegan Tribe:

a. The Mohegan Tribe is a part of a larger language/culture group known as Woodland/Algonquian, who have been located for thousands of years over the vast territory of eastern and northern North America. Locate on a map the location of Woodland/Algonquian American Indian tribes at the time of Anglo/European exploration and settlement.

b. The Mohegan Tribe was originally a clan of the Lenni Lenape, or Delaware Tribe, a part of the great Algonquian culture whose ancient origins were far to the west and north of the Great Lakes Region. Long before European exploration and settlement, the Delaware Tribe resided in the northern New York region. The Mohegan/Pequot clan then migrated to their present homeland in Connecticut. The “ancient clan name” for the Mohegans translated to mean “Wolf People.” Locate on a map the location of the Delaware Tribe at the time of Anglo/European exploration and settlement. Consider the significance of the ancient relationship between the Mohegan/Pequot Tribe to the upstate New York tribes in terms of trade relationships at the time of Anglo/European colonization.

2. Archaeologists, anthropologists and geographers have proposed a number of theories about the migration and settlement of Native peoples in North America. The “Bering Straits” theory is one of the oldest, but as new evidence is uncovered, new theories about the migration of American Indians to North and South America are developed. Compare these theories with the traditional stories of the Mohegan Tribe about their origins. Suggest ways in which the western scientific theories might be reconciled with Mohegan oral history. Consider why Anglo/European cultures would want to believe that American Indians had migrated from the European continent. Why would the Mohegan Tribe and other tribes believe that they had originated on this continent?

§ Ways of knowing within the Mohegan Tribe

2. Oral History

“My great, great grandmother, Mary Tracy Fielding Story, told this tale that her great, great grandmother told to her.”

Faith Davison, Archivist, Mohegan Tribe

Note how often in this segment the narrators refer to telling a story that they have heard. Identify the characteris-
tics of oral history that assure the accuracy of the historical account of the Mohegan Tribe, such as clear genealogy, continuity of tribal membership over a long period of time, and readily identifiable landmarks. Why is a clear accurate oral history tradition important to the survival of a tribe? What kinds of facts are important for the tribe to remember?

Analyze ways in which oral history not only assures that the basic facts about the Mohegan Tribe are accurately preserved, but also its cultural heritage, such as tobacco ceremonies, council meetings and hospitality.

3. The Homeland

“This is Uncas’s Spring and not far from here is the cabin of Uncas. This is an important place to us, really a sacred place because the waters are said to bring strength and to bring healing and it’s also a place where we continually honor Uncas.”

Jayne Fawcett, Mohegan Tribal Ambassador

Identify the many times in this segment of the video when narrators refer to places located in the Mohegan homeland. How do these places become a way of knowing about the Tribe?

Describe the relationship between the Tribe’s territory and its culture, such as continuity and stability over a long period of time, commonly known stories and common experiences. Analyze the video in terms of these relationships.

Since many Indian tribes were forcibly relocated west, how would such relocation affect the relationship between Native people and their special places?

4. Keepers of the treasure

“This collar represents the only artifact of wampum that has stayed in the hands of Indian people in all of New England.”

Melissa Tantaquidgeon, Tribal Historian

Several times during this segment of the video, the narrators use artifacts to document tribal memory: a wampum collar, a cup by a spring, Uncas’s pipe. How do these artifacts enrich our knowledge of the Mohegan Tribe, and document its historic events and cultural heritage?

Consider the conditions under which a tribe can use artifacts as reliable sources of knowledge. What are the dangers and pitfalls for tribes and outside groups when artifacts become disassociated from these conditions? Why are tribal continuity, stability and genealogy important? Develop a hypothesis about the relationship between continuity and stability and cultural memory.

5. Tribal society

“I have been authorized by the Tribe to carry this and use it at very special occasions.”

Ernest Gilman, Mohegan Pipe Carrier

There are a few places in this segment of the video in which the narrator talks about his or her “official” or traditional role in the Tribe, such as carrying Uncas’s pipe or keeping a spring clean. Examine how peoples’ roles within a tribe assure continuity of knowledge and practice within the tribe. What would happen to tribal heritage, stability and identity if these assigned roles disappeared? How does social cohesion lend power and endurance to American Indian tribes?

Compare and contrast the larger non-tribal American society with American Indian tribal societies, such as the Mohegan Tribe. Are there agreed-upon roles for assuring continuity of knowledge and practice? Do religious clerics fill this role? What about historians, civic and cultural leaders?

Explore how the fluidity and mobility of present American society may have diminished historical and cultural continuity and stability. Do these remain important social values in America, or does American society prefer change, reevaluation, reinvention, and divergent perspectives? Is there a fundamental tension between the values of tribal societies, such as those protected by the Mohegan Tribe, and the larger American society? If so, describe ways these two cultures can accommodate each other. Develop a hypothesis about the significance of cultural memory in American society.

“When the English came in their ships the Indians saw those vessels and they thought that they were animals with great white wings…. And one of the prophets said, this is the animal that will come and eat all of the Indians up. We’re here. They didn’t do it.”

Faith Davison, Archivist, Mohegan Tribe

§ Mohegan and Pequot: The separation

“Sassacus wanted to fight the English, Uncas thought his wisdom was better, that we were too few in number and that we should try to befriend the English rather than fight them.”

Carleton Eichelberg, Mohegan Elder

1. The next segment of the video, will present a closer look at the conflicts between the Anglo/European colonists and the American Indian tribes in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In this segment, focus on a few key facts about the schism between the Pequots and Mohegans. What was the blood relationship between Sassacus and Uncas? Given this relationship and the significance of tribal identity and continuity, how wrenching would the schism be? What is the powerful philosophical issue involved in the schism? What were the risks for both Uncas and Sassacus?

2. In terms of Mohegan Tribal history, how did the separation between the Mohegan and Pequot tribes create a unique tribal identity for the Mohegans? Analyze the significance for the Mohegan Tribe (and non-Indians) of Sam Deloria’s observation:

“In strictly non-Indian historical terms, not too many tribes can have a founder’s day. This is our founder. Why not? You know exactly who it is, and you can practically pinpoint the date when the tribe was founded in the sense that we look at it as a tribe. …and because [the Mohegans] can trace genealogies, they know who’s descended from him [Uncas] and all of that, it makes it much more difficult for the tribe to mythologize him; he becomes a very distinct historical figure for them and he has to remain that because there’s too much of a tribal memory.”
Student Project

1. Start a timeline of Anglo/European colonization of North America, identifying intersections with known facts about the Mohegan Tribe and other tribes in New England. Continue this timeline through the unit.

Further study

1. The migration and settlement of American Indian tribes prior to Anglo/European contact.
2. The social organization and economic patterns of Southern New England American Indian tribes.
3. Compare and contrast the origin stories of other American Indian tribes with the origin history of the Mohegan Tribe.
4. Compare and contrast the origin stories of other Native peoples throughout the world with American Indian tribes.
5. Compare origin stories with prevailing scientific theories and religious beliefs on the creation and origins of peoples.
6. Research the current debate over Kennewick man, an ancient North American skeleton whose origin is currently in question.