



New World Networks, 1200–1490s

By Nicole Magie

Diverse indigenous communities thrived and had extensive networks of exchange across the Americas long before Europeans arrived to the New World in the 1490s.



Indigenous Networks of Exchange

Although people often call the Americas the “New World,” it wasn’t new at all for the people who were already there. When you think about indigenous Americans during the 300 years before Europeans arrived, what pictures come to your mind? Small communities growing corn and fishing in North America? Or do you see powerful empires like the Aztecs and Incas? Both are right but the two vast continents of North and South America were home to diverse indigenous communities with vibrant networks of exchange. These networks were thriving hundreds of years before the 1490s and the start of the Columbian Exchange.

To really get an idea of how different these communities were, just think of the changing scenery across the Americas, from northern Canada all the way to the southern tip of Argentina. People lived in frozen tundra, grassy plains, fertile river basins, ocean coasts, high mountains, and dry deserts. This variety of natural environments provided indigenous Americans with vastly different resources, skills, and cultures depending on where they lived.

Some communities foraged, others farmed. Still others lived in large empire systems of connected communities. All that cultural and environmental diversity also meant they had different resources to exchange between communities. There were tangible trade items like buffalo meat, fish, turquoise, and copper, but they could also exchange intangible things like information and ideas. Whether it was something you carried in your bag or in your brain, you could share it through the small and large exchange networks connecting communities throughout the Americas.

Let’s broaden our picture of these varied communities by exploring the Americas from one end to the other—North America, Mesoamerica, and South America. Each of these areas had hundreds of networks within them, which eventually helped develop larger networks. Foods, raw materials, animals, and manufactured items were exchanged along these networks, sometimes on foot, sometimes by water travel. Different peoples and their different ways of life enriched these ever-evolving networks of exchange.

North American Networks

North America’s many networks of exchange were mainly centered along river valleys, such as the Mississippi River basin. Many agricultural communities lived around there, and the largest, called Cahokia, had a population of about 30,000 people! As a river basin, the area provided rich soil for farming. The river’s water was also needed for thirsty humans and the animals they hunted. In addition, its rivers were used for travel and trade.



Sculpture of a ball game played by Aztecs that spread north to Oasisans. They were both in the same network of exchange. The sculpture was created as early as 200 CE, which shows how exchange can also happen over time. Public domain.

These characteristics made the Mississippi River basin a great location for human settlement, supporting a wide range of indigenous American communities.

The Mississippi basin was a useful route for technologies like corn and beans to spread from Mesoamerica to the north. For example, during this period, six large communities sharing a nation came together as a political Confederation. This was the Haudenosaunee—also called Iroquois—whose territory stretched across the southern edge of the Great Lakes. The women used the rich soil of the region to grow crops such as corn and beans, while the men fished and hunted deer. When a community produced more of one thing than it needed, it could trade surplus crops with other communities all along the Mississippi and beyond.

The Oasisians—also called Pueblos—lived in the western part of North America, but were also part of the Mesoamerican network of exchange. Living in arid climates, they built sandstone and adobe villages. They also developed impressive irrigation systems to farm similar crops as the Haudenosaunee: corn, beans, and squash. Like the Cahokia settlement, the Oasisians' decline is a mystery, though we do know they experienced a long drought. This may have diminished resources, leading to conflict. Or maybe there was mass migration away from the area.



Oasisian settlement that is today called Cliff Palace at the Mesa Verde National Park in the United States. U.S. National Park Service.

Of course, North America had many other indigenous communities beyond those in the Mississippi River valley or the Mesoamerican networks. This included plains hunters as well as fishing communities on the west coast. Further north in modern-day Canada and Alaska, there were also sub-arctic foraging communities. All these indigenous communities thrived without being part of an empire. However, all of these communities were connected to those around them through networks of exchange.

Mesoamerican networks

The Oasisians formed a close and vibrant network with indigenous Mesoamericans (now Mexico and Central America). The Aztecs—also called Mexicas, and where Mexico got its name—were at the center of this vibrant trade web. Aztec marketplaces, worked by both male and female professional merchants, attracted no fewer than 60,000 daily visitors. That's about three times how many currently visit the Eiffel Tower per day. When the Spaniards arrived, they were amazed by this massive empire of 25 million people. In 1519, the Spanish explorer Bernal Díaz de Castillo wrote, "With such wonderful sights to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this was real that we saw before our eyes. On the land side there were great cities, and on the lake many more. The lake was crowded with canoes. At intervals along the causeway there were many bridges, and before us was the great city of Mexico"



Spanish map of the capital of the Aztec Empire (1524 CE), Tenochtitlán, that Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote about. Public domain.

This impressive empire was maintained by requiring its people to pay tribute (a form of taxation). The Aztec empire was therefore a network of communities that were controlled by a central power. But this also created a network of trade and interaction throughout Mesoamerica. Goods that were exchanged or collected as tribute included food, textiles, gold, and silver—and even human life. It was no joke: the Aztecs threatened tributary states with destruction or sacrifice to the gods. In this way, they ruled partly by instilling fear into their subjects.

Another way to control the population was with a complex and rigid social system. The Aztec empire assigned each individual a certain status. Your ranking determined many aspects of your life. For example, in the Tarascan Empire, located northwest of the Aztecs, your status even determined what food you ate. As an upper-class noble, you would eat meat, but as a commoner, you'd get fish. So, in this way, even simple items of exchange could represent differences in status. The consistent social structure, along with rule by fear, provided these societies with a kind of unity that made rebellions less likely.

So far, our discussion of Mesoamerica has focused on empires, but there were many other peoples living outside these expansive, centralized states. For example, there were indigenous communities along the coasts of both the Pacific and Caribbean sides of Mesoamerica. These groups traded with the communities and empires in this region and provided goods such as shells and minerals and foods like dried fish.

South American networks

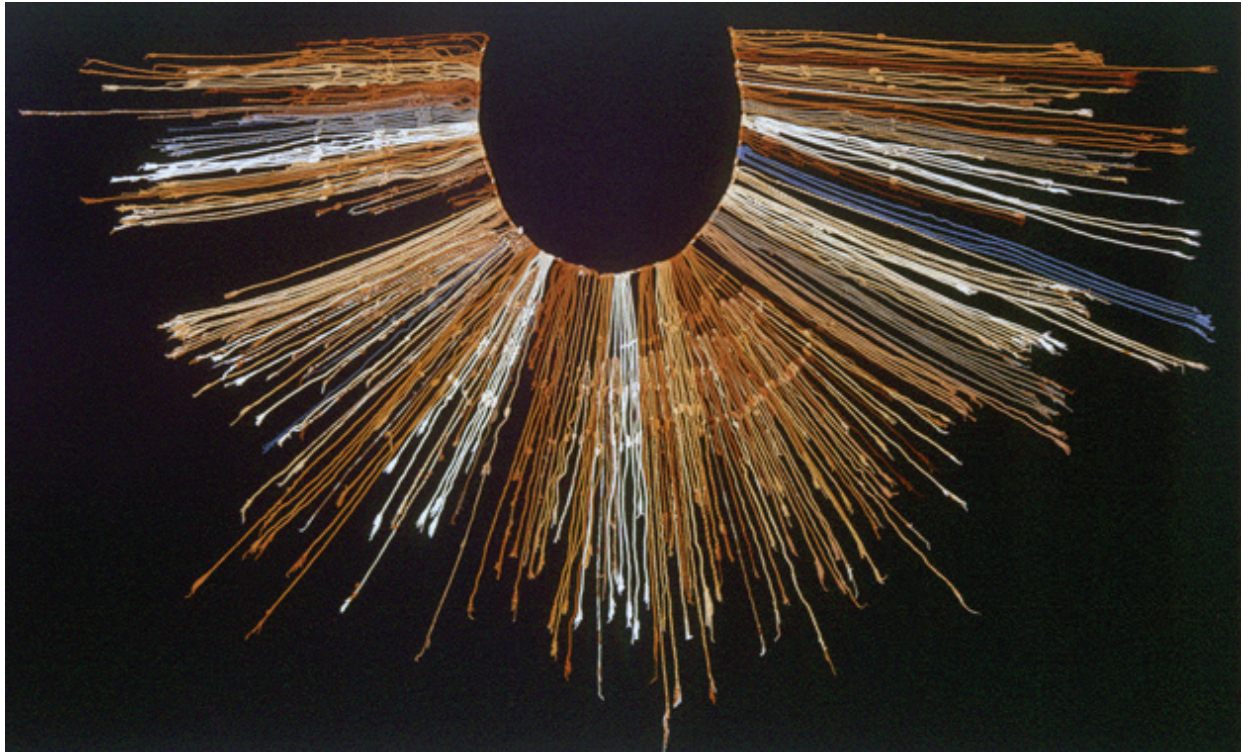
The largest and most influential empire of South America was the Inca Empire. The empire was called Tawantinsuyu, but we know it as the Inca Empire because Inca was the title of its rulers. These innovators managed to unify despite having a major challenge the others did not: geography. Not only did the empire connect high mountain ranges down steep ravines to a thin coastal strip, it also stretched thousands of miles north and south along that range. Imagine trying to unite, feed, and house a large and diverse population spread across vast forests in one of the highest mountain ranges in the world. Oh, and it's 500 years ago, so there are no helicopters, phones, or convenience stores. How would you do it?

The Incas of the Andes Mountains overcame this problem by building an extensive road system (25,000 miles of road if you stretched it all out). They then used athletic boys known as *chasqui* as runners to carry important messages for the empire. These runners could cover 150 miles in one day on the Inca roads! At least there were resting houses along the way, stocked with provisions. The messages were communicated using a system of colorful knots, called *quipus*. The Incas also provided for their subjects by building a complex water irrigation system and even earthquake-resistant stone buildings.

However, all of these projects required lots of manual labor, so the Incas had a *mita* system—basically a tax paid by laboring for part of the year. This system often forced Inca communities to move, depending on where the empire's next labor-intensive project was. But, in return, the empire was able to protect people from famine by distributing food they had stored up. They also offered care when people were sick. The various communities within the empire relied on trading with each other, because the different crops the empire required were grown in different areas. For example, corn might come from one community and potatoes from another. So, the empire had to distribute these goods and others like fish, metals, and textiles from their own specialized places. The Inca were unusual in that most of their trade happened within the empire, while trading with other empires was pretty rare.



The Inca Empire constructed a 25,000-mile long road system through the Andes Mountains. Manco Capac, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Inca quipu housed at the Larco Museum in Lima, Peru. Claus Ableiter, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Diversity of indigenous Americans

We hear a lot about empires like the Aztecs or Incas because they were more complex societies with a lot of people. We also know more because they were centers of political and economic power that became important in the Columbian Exchange that began in the 1490s. But the rich variety of networks, both within empires and outside of these centers, were in place for hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of years before the arrival of the Europeans. These intricate webs of exchange would soon become even more complex when they came together with Afro-Eurasian networks. By this point, both regional networks of Afro-Eurasia and the Americas had developed separately over thousands of years. So after the 1490s, when they came together to form one global network, the complexity and diversity of exchange reached new heights.

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Oasisian settlement that is today called Cliff Palace at the Mesa Verde National Park in the United States. U.S. National Park Service. https://www.nps.gov/meve/learn/historyculture/cd_cliff_palace_tour.htm.

Spanish map of the capital of the Aztec Empire (1524 CE), Tenochtitlán, that Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote about. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Tenochtitlan,_1524.jpg#/media/File:Map_of_Tenochtitlan,_1524.jpg.

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