

Background Information

Teacher note: The purpose of this excerpt is to provide background information to support *Examining Cross-cultural Observations* MT. It is intended for use within the context of the *Modelling the Tools* resource only. Terminology found in the excerpt must be considered within the context of the historical time period.

The following excerpt is intended to help students recognize that anthropological accounts are culturally sensitive and, as such, may reflect elements of cultural superiority, ethnocentrism and stereotyping. In this account, a French missionary Louis Hennepin (in italics) offers a medieval European perspective that the First Nations people have the origins as Jewish people.

Origins

It was very difficult for the French to understand the First Nations cultures they encountered in America. They did not know what to think of people so different from themselves. Some Europeans categorized First Nations people in terms of a strange species of beings that were neither human nor animals ... Other Europeans used religious concepts from the Bible to interpret First Nations people. Were they sons and daughters of Adam, like the Europeans? Were they human beings, capable of spiritual understanding of God? Or were they like animals who lacked a divine human spirit? One explanation of the mysterious origins of First Nations people was that they were one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel described in the Bible. A French missionary speculated on this theory.

One would be apt to suspect that these Savages of America originally sprung from the Jews, some of whom might causally have been wreckt and cast upon that Part of the World; for they have several Customs not unlike theirs; they make their Cabins in the form of tents, like as the Jews did; they anoint themselves with Oil, and are superstitiously addicted to Divination from Dreams. They bewail the Dead with great lamentation. The Women go into mourning for their near relations a whole year, during which time they abstain from dancing and feasting, and wear a sort of hood upon their heads, and commonly the Father or Brother of the Deceas'd take care of the Widow. Besides it seems as if God had laid a particular Malediction upon 'em, as he did upon the Jews: They are brutish, and persist unalterably in their Opinions; they have no certain fix'd place of abode; they are very lascivious, and have such gross Conceptions that when we tell 'em Souls are immortal and immaterial, they ask what they eat in the other world. Moreover we may observe some Conformity between Moses's Relations of the Creation of the World, and the belief of the Savages about it . . .

Louis Hennepin [Récollet missionary], *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America* (London, 1698), vol. II, p. 58.

Adapted from Ruth Sandwell et al. *Early Contact and Settlement in New France* (Vancouver, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2002), pp. 33–60. Permission granted by The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.