

Mahican

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family: Mohican, Mahican, Algonkian

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): mjj

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): The Mahican could be found in modern Connecticut and Vermont, bound between the Catskill Mountains and the southern end of Lake Champlain from north to south, and the Schoharie River and the Berkshire Mountains from west to east.¹

1.4 Brief history: The Mahican seemed to have their roots in the Point Peninsula Complex, around 700 A.D. They survived next to several powerful and influential neighbors, such as the Iroquois.² In 1609, Henry Hudson sailed up Hudson Bay, far enough to find a village of Mahican eager to trade. Hudson came away with several furs which attracted a great deal of attention. In subsequent years, the Dutch set up a booming fur trade in and around the Mahican territory. Gradual settlement by Europeans pushed the Mahican steadily westward. In the 1820s and 1830s, the Mahican were offered a reservation in Wisconsin, where they settled.¹

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Mahicans were most influenced by their neighbors, primarily the Mohawk-Iroquois, starting around A.D. 1000.² The introduction of the Europeans brought about the fur trade, where several tribes including the Mahican fought fiercely to gain control of it. The Mahicans saw several missionaries as well, resulting in either forced or voluntary conversion to Christianity in several instances.

1.6 Ecology: The land was mostly forested, with a mixture of conifers and broad-leaved hardwoods. Most activity was concentrated around the rivers and creeks, and the valleys therein.

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: The precise population tends to be very debatable. The best guess is around 4500 individuals. In the present day, there are 1,500 Mahican living on the reservation. ¹ An average village held 200 people.²

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): Maize, squash, berries²

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Sunflower seeds, beans, herring, shad, mussels, groundnuts, passenger pigeons, rabbit, moose, deer²

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: Bow and arrows, spears, and traps were all used.²

2.4 Food storage: Food was stored in grass- or bark-lined pits.²

2.5 Sexual division of production: Horticulture and gathering was primarily a female occupation. Hunting was the men's realm. The older men and women who couldn't work often practiced crafts. Men carved wooden bowls, spoons, etc. while women made pottery, wove, or decorated skin cloths. ²

2.6 Land tenure: There were certain well-defined tracts of garden land along the rivers that were claimed and passed down a lineage. Other than that, boundaries away from the river were vague at best. There's no evidence of hunting territories being claimed or separated.²

2.7 Ceramics: Present, made by women.²

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: Food was shared among families.² When a group of men made a kill, they divided the meat up among themselves, to be distributed to each man's family. There is evidence that a widow would be given meat as well. ³

2.9 Food taboos: None found.

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?: The men used bark canoes and dugouts to fish.²

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): Unknown

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): Unknown

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): Unknown

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): Unknown

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): Unknown

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): Unknown

- 4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): Unknown
- 4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: Unknown
- 4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: Marriages were between one man and one woman.²
- 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: In a sense. The man did not pay the woman's family, but rather friends and family gave the woman gifts to indicate their approval of the marriage.⁶
- 4.9 Inheritance patterns: One's kinship is traced through the mother, and inheritance happens through the mother as well.² If there is a marriage that ends in separation then the woman keeps the children, domestic possessions, and domestic responsibility.⁶
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: Children were expected to respect and obey parents.²
- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: Unknown
- 4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): There was a definite pattern of exogamy. Endogamy occurred but rarely.²
- 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?: There is one father and one mother for each child.⁶
- 4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows"):
- 4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?
- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: Rape does indeed happen, though it is seen as a crime and discouraged.⁶
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin): One generally wanted a spouse who came from another village and thus not too closely related.²
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?: Women are expected to remain faithful to their husbands.⁶
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring: None
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?: The child usually is adopted by another set of parents or taken care of by a woman.⁶
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: Unknown
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades: None
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?: One was expected to respect one's elders, especially parents and grandparents.²
- 4.24 Joking relationships?: Unknown
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: Mahicans were matrilineal as far as wealth, kinship, etc, as well as often matrilineal. This becomes evident in the fact that one's mother's and mother's sister's children were brothers and sisters, while one's father's brother's and sister's children were stepsiblings.²
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules: Mahicans could not have sexual intercourse with those in their family "in the third degree."²
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?: If a young man expressed his interest then his parents consulted with friends and family. Those in favor gave gifts to the bride-to-be. If the young woman accepted these gifts then the marriage is considered imminent. There is a marriage feast organized by the bride and her friends, and can last several days.⁶
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?: One could be adopted by a rival tribe after having been captured. In that case, one's former identity is gone.³
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?): It is preferred for both sexes that one marry outside the community.²
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?: There wasn't outright arrangement, but pressurization was present in some cases. Sometimes the woman accepted gifts (and the marriage) in order to satisfy the expectations of friends and family.⁶
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: Sometimes the young man wishes to marry, but his parents or his friends and family disapprove. The woman's family may not wish for the marriage to go through either.⁶

Warfare/homicide

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: Unknown
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: Unknown

- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: Homicide, warfare, accidents.²
- 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): The Mahican were surrounded by numerous neighbors, mainly the Iroquois and Mohawk, and had continuous warlike relations with them. However, there is evidence of trading occurring as well.¹
- 4.18 Cannibalism?: Prisoners of war were ritually tortured and were meant to show great stoicism and strength in the face of pain. If they impressed their captors, then their strength could be appropriated through ritual consumption of the man's body after death.³

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: Around 200 people in an average village²
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): The villages were more or less permanent, established in the form of longhouses. Mahicans did have to move every 8-12 years when they exhausted surrounding resources. There is, however, some evidence of a semi-nomadic lifestyle, for the men. In the spring they would often be gone from the village, gathering fish and mussels. They returned home for the harvest, then set out again on hunting drives during early winter. They returned around mid-winter and stayed in the village before leaving again to hunt moose in March. ²
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): Each village had a chief that acted as a political leader, usually an older man. One of these village chiefs may also have acted as chief of one of the three major clans. The leaders inherited their position through the female line, i.e. the chief's sister's son, or brother's son if needed, would take over. These hereditary positions did not have absolute power. Their decisions had to reflect popular opinion, and were restricted to religious and civic affairs. In times of war, the most prominent warrior became the war chief.²
- 5.4 Post marital residence: The Mahicans were generally matrilineal, and men often went to live with their wives. However, one certainly saw evidence of patrilocality.²
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): There seemed to be clear divisions between the Mahicans and their neighbors, the Mohawk, Iroquois, etc.²
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): Generally, the woman spent time together, same with the men. The senior citizens also tended to spend more time with one another.² There is a role called the Sachem. His job is to contemplate how to better the Mahican nation as a whole. He travels around villages and speaks to the people, holds councils, and promotes peace and good will. He isn't paid for his work, but people give him food and shelter whenever he comes to visit.⁶
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: Unknown
- 5.8 Village and house organization: Villages consisted of anywhere between three and sixteen long houses that each held about three nuclear families. Each longhouse held a series of closely related families, often containing a lineage or segment of the larger family. These families were very likely matrilineal, or even matrilineal.²
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses): Chiefs tended to have larger, nicer longhouses, which also served as ceremonial meeting places.²
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?: No hammocks, slept on mats and furs.²
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: People lived with their families, all in a large longhouse. Lineage was clearly known, and clans tended to stay together. There is belief that the Mahicans had three clan eponyms: the Bear, the Wolf, and the Turtle.²
- 5.12 Trade: There is evidence that the Mahican traded with their neighbors, using food, wampum, beads, and other items.⁵
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?: Each lineage recognized an older man who acted as a representative, and the position was handed down by lineage. There was evidence of a kind of aristocracy among the Mahicans, though it was nowhere near as rigid as the classic European system. ²

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

- 6 Time allocation to RCR: Unknown
- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): Evidence of some kind of specialist who made the Deer Sacrifice ceremony.³
- 6.2 Stimulants: Fasting and "powerful medicines" ³

- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): Green Corn ceremonials took place in late August, when the Mahican celebrated their ability to start harvesting from both their gardens and nature. The men assisted women in the harvest, and there were such things as first fruits observances and first game rituals.² Men underwent a ritual wherein they fasted and underwent trials for several days. They then were contacted by spirits that told them what they had been before birth and what they would become after death. These spirits were believed to help guide the men through life and to protect them.³ After menarche, young Mahican women cut off their hair and went to live in the woods for several weeks.⁶
- 6.4 Other rituals: One also saw Deer Sacrifice and Bear Sacrifice rituals.² The Deer Sacrifice occurred when a group of men killed a deer. An old man stood over the slain deer and made a “prayer” to a higher power to thank it for the meat and acknowledge the higher power as the source of all things. Then the meat would be distributed and the old man paid in wampum. The ritual, according to a Mahican, came from a man who had come down from heaven and cleared the land of monsters. He taught the people the religious ways of the heavens and married and had two children. One day, while praying, he began to rise and returned to the heavens, though he left one of his children behind to teach the people more things. The Deer Sacrifice ritual was meant to acknowledge the favor of the spirits. ³
- 6.5 Myths (Creation): There is a myth explaining how the Mahican got to their current location. They said their ancestors came from somewhere in the west. One day a group of men found an island with good game and resources. They moved their families there. After many years, they found another island further to the east and even better than the first. They moved to this second island and soon after, the first island sank into the water. They continued this pattern until they came to a mainland and stayed.⁵
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): The Mahican are known for their beadwork and basketry. They made wampum out of purple and white shell beads, which could also be used as currency. Story telling was another important past time, helping to establish a sense of history and community.⁵
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR: There is evidence of ritual torture of prisoners of war. The decision to either adopt the prisoners or to torture them rests with the women, both of which are meant to appease the deaths of the women’s relatives. If the woman chose to have the prisoner killed, then they played the central role. It was a woman’s responsibility to balance the spiritual disruptions formed after a death.³
- 6.8 Missionary effect: The presence of Christianity more or less wiped out the native religion. Conversions could be forced or serve as a thin veneer for native beliefs. However, there also were many self-elected conversions, thanks to the work of both missionaries and, later, Mahican Christians.³
- 6.9 RCR revival: Present.⁵
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: It was believed that if a prisoner of war remained stoic and brave while being tortured, and if he impressed his captors, then when he died his soul would be permitted to enter the body of an unborn baby.³
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?: No
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy?: None
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): Little of the original faith survived the missionaries. However, there is belief that the Mahicans saw the sun as a god, or the home of a god. They may have believed in a supreme, invisible being who was the maker of all things.³

7. Adornment

- 7.1 Body paint: Unknown
- 7.2 Piercings: Unknown
- 7.3 Haircut: The Mahicans are the originators of the eponymous Mohawk. Warriors would shave all their hair save for a single strip.⁵
- 7.4 Scarification: Unknown
- 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): Feathers and beads were worn for special occasions.⁵
- 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Unknown
- 7.7 Sex differences in adornment: Unknown
- 7.8 Missionary effect: Unknown
- 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: Unknown

8. Kinship systems

- 8.1 Sibling classification system: One's sister's children are closer than one's brother's children.⁴
- 8.2 Sororate, levirate: Occurs, but not necessarily mandatory.⁶
- 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):
Unknown

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

1. Evocation of the blood and wounds was meant to bring both physical and spiritual sustenance to the self, family and community.³

Numbered references

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