

Beothuk Indians

1. Description

- 1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: Beothuk, they spoke their own Beothuk language that is considered to be of Algonquian origin. (1,428)
- 1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): 639
- 1.3 Location (Latitude/Longitude): 53 N, 60 W
- 1.4 Brief history: The Beothuk were a people native to the island of Newfoundland. They seemed to have migrated there from Labrador around 1 C.E. The Beothuk seemed to make good use of the fish, plants, birds, and wild game that inhabited the island until the encroachment of settlers from Europe. The Beothuk tried to move inland rather than try to fight the settlers that were taking over the coast. This led to a huge reliance on big game such as caribou since they could no longer fish in the main rivers and bays. This reliance led to a decline in caribou population that shocked the Beothuk population, causing starvation, undernourishment and eventually the extinction of the Beothuk people as a whole. The European settlers referred to the Beothuk they observed as “Red Indians” because of their traditional use of “red ochre” to paint their bodies, canoes, houses, and household appliances and weapons (1,272)
- 1.5 Influence of Missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: Over the course of the seventeenth century, the Beothuk did not only have to deal with the increasing encroachment of European settlers, colonialists and fishermen. They dealt with the hostilities and encroachment of Mimic groups hunting and trapping on the south and west coasts, as well as Inuits crossing the Strait of Belle Isle to Notre Dame Bay. There were also Montagnais hunters beginning to exploit resources on the Northern Peninsula. (1,43)
- 1.6 Ecology (Natural Environment): The Island of Newfoundland is a place rich with game, seabirds, and fish. All of which the Beothuk lived off of. The rivers would seasonally be filled with migrating salmon which traditionally made up the bulk of their diet. During the right season, the Beothuk would make for the coast in order to catch seabirds and their eggs on the smaller islands.(1,295)
- 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home size, pop. Density: Recent scholars have estimated that during the time of first European contact in the 1500's, the Beothuk population could have been 500-1000 people. Mean band size was usually 35-55 people. (1,278) Beothuk homes were called Mamateeks. These Mamateeks were poles set in a round form (4-8 sided) covered in deer skins. They would build a fire in the middle of the Mamateek (1,350)

2. Economy

- 2.1 Main Carbohydrate sources: Fruit, roots, and inner bark of the spruce tree. (1,298)
- 2.2 Main Protein Lipid source: Salmon, Caribou. (1,299)
- 2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, knives, darts, slings, clubs. (1, 97)
- 2.4 Food Storage: Frozen caribou meat, dried or smoked meat, rendered caribou fat, seal oil, seal fat, seal stomachs filled with intestines, dried lobster tails and fish, sausages, dried or smoked salmon, and dried and powdered eggs. (1,296)
- 2.5 Sexual Division of production:

- 2.6 Land Tenure: The Beothuk were the main inhabitants of the Island for many hundreds of years until Europeans started encroaching on their coastal settlements and eventually the inland camps as well.
- 2.7 Ceramics:
- 2.8 Specified sharing pattern:
- 2.9 Food Taboos: Rituals would have to be performed out of respect for the soul of the caribou that would be hunted and eaten. (1,380)
- 2.10 Canoes/Watercraft: The Beothuk, like many other North American Indians, built birchbark canoes. These canoes were their most important means of transportation and had excellent carrying capacity and were reputed to be swifter than a 10-oared boat. They used these to navigate not only rivers and lakes, but also the ocean. A small canoe could be carried by one man on his shoulders or head, while a larger canoe could be carried by two or three men. These vessels allowed the Beothuk to travel as far as Funk Island, which is sixty kilometers off the coast of Newfoundland. (1,365)

3. Anthropometry

- 3.1 Mean adult height (male and female): Several sixteenth-century records state that the Beothuk were “tall”, in contrast to other Indians who were of “our size”. They were well formed and appeared healthy and athletic, of medium stature, probably from 5ft 8in to 5ft 9in.(1, 336)

4. Life History, Marriage, Mating

- 4.1 Age at Menarche:
- 4.2 Age at first birth (Male and Female):
- 4.3 Completed Family Size: 4-8 (1,274)
- 4.4 Inter-birth interval:
- 4.5 Age first marriage:
- 4.6 Portion of marriages ending in divorce:
- 4.7 Percent marriages polygamous, percent males married polygamous:
- 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:
- 4.9 Inheritance Patterns:
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:
- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes toward homosexuals:
- 4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): Exogamy, marriage most likely between bands in order to establish a positive cooperative relationship between the two bands. (1,287)
- 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception: is it paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?:
- 4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly?:
- 4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (semen builds up over time):
- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape:
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g. cross cousin):
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?:
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring:
- 4.20 If mother dies, who raises children?:
- 4.21 Adult sex ration: number of adult males divided by number of reproductive females:
- 4.22 Evidence for couvade:

- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g. lesser/younger vs. major/older):
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect:
- 4.25 Joking relationships:
- 4.26 Patterns of descent for certain rights, names or associations:
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?:
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, obtain a different name?:
- 4.29 Is marriage usually within community or outside community? (m/f difference):
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?:
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Warfare/homicide

- 4.32 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:
- 4.33 Out-group vs in-group cause of violent death: While not much is known about in-group violence, the Beothuk murdered and fought against Europeans throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. By 1800, hundreds of Micmac were permanently settled in Newfoundland and began hunting down any Beothuk. The major advantage the Micmac's had was the gun, which they acquired through trading with Europeans (1,155)
- 4.34 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: The main cause of out-group killings done by the Beothuk was to keep away the European encroachment into their lands. Although the Europeans did not have the intentions to harm or destroy the Beothuk people, hostilities were always high and the Beothuk killed many wishing to trade through their skill with the bow and arrow. (1,95)
- 4.35 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): The Beothuk had relations with the Micmac people up until a turning point event. Two hunting groups, one Beothuk and one Micmac ran into each other on a river. In their canoes the Micmac had concealed the heads of two murdered Beothuk for which they wished to collect a reward from the French. Upon discovery of this treachery, the Beothuk invited the Micmac to a feast, seating each Micmac between two Beothuk. At a signal, every Beothuk stabbed his Micmac neighbor. (1,46)
- 4.36 Cannibalism?:

5. Socio-Political Organization and Interaction

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: ~50 people (1,279)
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): The Beothuk's most important resources, Caribou, seal, and salmon, were migratory species. In response to these animals, habits and habitats, the Beothuk moved in an annual cycle from inland locations to the coast and vice versa. (1,294)
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc., wealth or status classes): It is known that both men and women could be hold a heightened status within a community. Chiefs are believed to have larger than average Mamateeks in which they eventually be buried in with all kinds of gifts and artifacts that their family wished to keep with the deceased. (1,292)
- 5.4 Post marital residence:
- 5.5 Territoriality? (Defined boundaries, active defense): The Beothuk were essentially the only people living on Newfoundland until European settlers and other Native American tribes landed looking to exploit the natural resources available. Newfoundland is a very

large island (40,000 square miles) so it was very difficult for the relatively small population of native Beothuk to defend their land. The Beothuk consistently refused to trade or cooperate with the Europeans that were trying to make positive contact. Lots of conflict arose as the Europeans started setting up fisheries and hunting camps on the main river channels that the Beothuk relied on for salmon. This conflict led to violence in which the Beothuk would kill small groups of Europeans with their bow and arrows. The action the Beothuk took caused for alarm within the European communities and armed expeditions began being sent out to seek the Beothuk. (1,85)

- 5.6 Social interaction divisions? (age and sex):
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:
- 5.8 Village and house organization: The Beothuk build structures called Mamateeks in which they lived for most of the year, when they were not hunting on the coast for birds and their eggs. They were usually four or five sided huts covered in pelts. It was also discovered that some Beothuk built structures called vapor baths where a pile of hot stones would be set underneath a cover. Steam was produced by pouring water on the stones and essentially turned the hut into a steam room. The Beothuk also build small mamateeks in order to dry different meats.(1,362)
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (men's houses):
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?: Within the mamateeks, the Beothuk slept in beds that would be placed in a circle around the fire. (1,351)
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc.: Beothuk lived in bands of around 40 people. Hunting groups from different bands would come together for events such as caribou hunts. However the geographic separation of bands would have fostered self-sufficiency and caused each group to conduct their daily affairs independently. (1,299)
- 5.12 Trade: For the most part, Beothuk refused to trade with Europeans and did not want or need to trade with other native americans that were hunting on Newfoundland. The Beothuk were very self sufficient and stayed that way until their numbers dwindled on the brink of extinction.
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

- 6.0 Time allocation to RCR:
- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): Shamans within the Beothuk have been described as the 'interface' between the people and the powers that embodied the environment on which the native people depended. Some shamans were capable of achieving visions or of making alliances with other animate beings and soliciting their assistance. Their task was to keep relationships with these powers harmonious so as to ensure success in hunting and other activities. It is also suggested that shamans usually possessed some knowledge or herbal and/or magical healing powers. (1,292)
- 6.2 Stimulants: Although uncertain, it is very possible that the Beothuk may have smoked the dried inner bark of the red willow through pipes made from twisting strips of birchbark. (1,382)
- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): It is believed that like many other Native groups, men and women acquired person guardian spirits through a vision quest. These quests were a period of isolation and starvation culminating in the appearance of an animal or bird that would become the guardian spirit or ally of the questor. Usually the

- quest was undertaken at puberty. The Beothuk also applied a first coat of red ochre to children at infancy as a sign of initiation. (1,382)
- 6.4 Other rituals: The Beothuk undertook hunting rituals in which they would honor the animals they killed. For example, Captain Buchan, who led a European expedition, discovered several caribou antlers that had been placed on a projecting rock on the bank of the Exploits River. Captain Buchan also described a decorated tree on a site inland from Badger bay. About 40 feet high, it was located on a projecting point of land on the shore of a lake where there was a wigwam. The bark had been stripped off, leaving only a small tuft of branches at the top. From this tuft downward, the tree was painted with alternate circles of red and white. In native rites and myth, a tree standing alone was a potential means of communication between man and the supernatural world. (1,380)
- 6.5 Myths (Creation): The Beothuk believed that “After God had made all things he took a number of arrows and did stick them into the ground from whence men and women grew”.
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): Festivities of various kinds usually included the singing of songs, of which the Beothuk had a large repertoire. Most songs centered on natural phenomena such as darkness, mountains, marshes, ponds, water, and a variety of animals that the Beothuk depended on for subsistence. The playing of two types of games that involved a type of dice, usually accompanied the springtime ochring ceremony. (1,388)
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR:
- 6.8 Missionary effect:
- 6.9 RCR revival:
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: To the Beothuk, death was considered as a form of sleep. They did not believe that the soul to abandon the sphere of the living entirely. They believed that life after death was spend “in the country of the good spirit,” on a happy island where one could hunt and fish and feast. It “was far away, where the sun when down behind the mountains.” It should be noted that the entitlement to a happy afterlife was dependent of the moral conduct of the person throughout their life. (1,383)
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?:
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy?:
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): The Beothuk's beliefs were centered around the idea that animals all had souls and that they must be respected. Shamans were said to possess powers that allowed them to interact with animals on a spiritual level. (1,292)

7. Adornment

- 7.1 Body paint: A very characteristic practice of the Beothuk was to cover their faces, hair, and entire bodies, as well as their clothing utensils, weapons, and canoes with red ochre (mixed with grease or other red-ish coloring). They also placed red ochre in burials, either in small packages or by mixing it in with the soil covering the grave. The red color was considered to be a mark of tribal identity. (1,285)
- 7.2 Piercings:
- 7.3 Haircut: John Guy wrote that the Beothuk “go bare headed, wearing their hair somewhat long but rounded... behind they have a great lock of hair platted with feathers like a

hawk's lure, with a feather in it standing upright by the crown of the head, and a small lock platted before". (1,337)

- 7.4 Scarification: It is unknown if the Beothuk tattooed their skin, but in one account, a man described the indians on the southern coast of Newfoundland as being marked "by certain lines made by applying fire to their faces, and are as if striped with a color between black and brown." (1,388)
- 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): Beothuk produced beads and discs from a variety of materials including small univalve shells and winkles. Some beads were placed on string which could have been used either as game counters or for decorative purposes. They also may have served as ritual objects.(1,398)
- 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: People of special importance may have worn decorative garb in the form of beads, animal pelts or carved bones. (1,399)
- 7.7 Sex differences in adornment:
- 7.8 Missionary effect:
- 7.9 Types of clothing: As far as we know, the Beothuk made their clothing largely from caribou skins. The hide, particularly in coats, was usually left intact and worn with the hair side against the body. They would also remove the hair from the hides, tan both sides, and then make different sorts of garments from the leather produced. The Beothuk also used beaver, marten, seal, and the skills of other small fur bearers. The Beothuk's major garment was a robe or coat, often referred to as a "cassocke" or "cossak" made out of deer or caribou pelts. It is described as a "short gown" that came down to the middle of the legs, with sleeves to the middle of the arms. Footwear was also made from the hide of caribou shanks. (1,346)

8. Kinship systems

- 8.1 Sibling classification system:
- 8.2 Sororate, levirate:
- 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

9. On 6 June 1829, A Beothuk woman named Shanawdithit died of tuberculosis. She was about 29 years old. Although her death is widely accepted as marking the end of the Beothuk people as a distinct cultural entity, oral evidence indicates that some survivors were still living on the island, in Labrador, and elsewhere in North America.

Works Cited:

(1) Marshall, Ingeborg. *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1996. Print.