

The Functional Family: The Foundation of Yaocomaco Society

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By all accounts, Native American people enjoyed a good life in what is now Southern Maryland before European settlers arrived. Archaeological and historical records provide only scant information about the Yaocomaco people, the Eastern Woodland Indian group who occupied this area. However, the narratives of Father Andrew White, a Jesuit priest who arrived with the first colonists in 1634, and the accounts of Europeans describing the Eastern Woodland Indians of Virginia provide some useful insights.

Woodland Indians used the resources of their environment intelligently. The entire population was involved in gathering, growing, and hunting for food, although work was generally divided along gender lines. Men were hunters, fishers, warriors, and toolmakers, while women managed the household, made mats, pots, baskets and clothing, and preserved hides. Women were also the botanists and farmers. In between and around the rest of their duties, they raised the children. Just as in our society today, most Woodland Indian women were working mothers. Generally speaking, men and women in Eastern Woodland Indian society did not spend much of the day together, men did not expect to control women, and both genders were respected for the contributions they made to the sustenance of the entire community.



Woodland Indian parents had a pretty good idea what the future held for their children. Most young people followed in the footsteps of the parent of the same gender. Indian children began training for the future as soon as they were able. Children aspired to be adults because that was where all of the excitement was. They soon learned that being included with the adults required mastering certain skills. Children probably weren't given much explanation about the tasks they needed to master, so they learned by observing and practicing. Even their games were devised to instill competence in the adult world.

Once past the toddler stage, little boys were given gentle encouragement by their mothers to practice skills that would eventually be used in hunting and fighting. Hunting and fighting require similar skills, prowess with a bow and arrow and long-distance running, so practicing for one activity kept the men ready for the other. Little girls stayed with the women and began to do women's work as soon as their physical abilities allowed. Pulling weeds or carrying a stick of firewood didn't require much

coordination. Gathering – a major source of food, medicines, and raw materials for household and decorative items – was a very complicated activity. To gather plants effectively and safely, the women had to learn where specific plants grew, what the plant looks like through different seasons, and what to do with the roots, leaves, stems and flowers that were harvested seasonally. The entire community probably worked together to erect buildings and clear fields. For both sexes, the skills needed to survive took years of practice and honing.

Marriage within Eastern Woodland Indian society was a practical and secular affair. While a good disposition and pleasant appearance must have had some influence, the most desirable partners were productive and able to contribute to a good life. Marriage was comparable to forming a team: spouses didn't expect to be friends or to enjoy a romantic attachment. Men were closest to other men and women were closest to other women. As in our culture today, boys and girls decided among themselves to marry.

Among the Woodland Indians, courtship rituals emphasized the role that food would take in a subsequent marriage. A suitor would bring food and edible plants to show that he was a good provider. Someone who was able to slay a deer for his own family and then a second for his girl made a big impression! It appears that young people who were not able to master life skills were regarded as unmarriageable, so they remained with their families. Eastern Woodland Indians did practice divorce, and most sources indicate that either party could be the instigator. Domestic violence was non-existent.

Some of the sights, sounds, and smells of a Yaocomaco village are recreated at Historic St. Mary's City's Woodland Indian Hamlet. Visitors can gain a fine appreciation of the skills the Yaocomaco people practiced by trying them. Our annual celebration of Native American culture and traditions in September allows visitors to experiment with Native American skills and culture--from archery and bead making to shelter building and tool making. There is traditional Native American clothing to try on, an introduction to the wide variety of foods found in the woodland environment, and special performances. Check out the "Events" page on our web site for more information.

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