Capt. John Smith, Pocahontas and a Clash of Cultures: A Case for the Ethnohistorical Perspective

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IN RECENT YEARS, HISTORIANS HAVE BEGUN to reexamine interpretations of many topics, particularly those concerning social and cultural perspectives. One area which has received a great deal of attention is the important story of the relations between native Americans and European colonizers, seen through the methodologies of ethnohistory.[1] Rather than being the passive victims of the westward advance of European civilization so often portrayed, the Indians were active participants with their own agendas. The early contact situations between Powhatan Indians and English colonists in Virginia have been clouded by misunderstanding and myth; when reexamined through a cultural perspective, however, even such famous incidents as the John Smith-Pocahontas encounter reveal the vibrant and conscious Indian approach to the situation. The natives had definite goals and objectives which affected the course of events just as much as did the actions of the English.

It is well known that when Captain Christopher Newport and the one hundred four original Jamestown settlers disembarked in Virginia they set out to claim the land for King James I of England. What is less widely recognized, however, is that in tidewater Virginia, Englishmen encountered a native chiefdom under the control of the great Powhatan, Wahunsonnacock, who was just as intent on imperial expansion as were his European counterparts. Chroniclers of the first decade of the colony's

existence recorded, sometimes unwittingly, the native chief's efforts to outmaneuver his new rivals for expanded control of eastern Virginia.

The English colonists planted themselves in the midst of an already powerful yet still expanding native chiefdom. Wahunsonnacock was successfully seeking to bring all of the Algonquian tribes of eastern Virginia — or Tsenacommacah, as the natives knew the region — under his control.[2] He increased his holdings through a mixture of force and intimidation, sometimes killing the leaders of recalcitrant tribes, removing the survivors, and repopulating the conquered territory with loyal subjects. A key of his expanding imperial web was the chieftain's practice of placing his sons or other chosen officials to rule over conquered tribes in the position of a werowance, or subordinate chief.[3] Through this web Wahunsonnacock also controlled the commerce and economy of the region by demanding tremendous amounts of tribute from his subjects.

As soon as the leaders of the two opposing cultures came into contact, they began jockeying for advantages in the imperial contest. The Powhatan repeatedly entreated Captain Smith to give up Jamestown and live close to him on the York River, at a place called "Cape Howasicke."[4] In exchange for food, the chief asked the colonists to provide him with metal hatchets and copper; undoubtedly, Wahunsonnacock intended to view these English goods as his accustomed tribute. He definitely desired to control the incoming English trade and to dominate the political situation of the region by moving the alien colony to a proximate location, hopefully insuring its cooperation.

As the competition continued, Wahunsonnacock at one point informed Captain Smith that he expected visiting English soldiers to "lay their armes at his feet, as did his subjects." Smith countered this stratagem by responding that enemies might make such a demand, but never friends. He then reaffirmed an earlier English promise to ally themselves with the Powhatans against their Siouan enemies to the west, the Monacans. But Wahunsonnacock declined, refusing to be outsmarted so easily, and remained evasive about allowing the colonists to contact his rivals in any way. As a sign of gratitude toward the English offer, however, "with a lowd oration he proclaimed [Smith] Awerowanes [i.e. a Werowance, or subordinate chief]" and announced "that all his subjects should so esteeme us ... and that Corne, weomen and Country, should be to [the English] as to his own people."[5] In his own perception, at least, the native chieftain had the last word in this exchange with the colonists.

The clearest example of Wahunsonnacock's efforts to bring the English colony into his imperial system occurred in January 1608 with the infamous John Smith-Pocahontas incident. As the captive Smith described the scene, "having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they

could, a long consultation was held but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan." Sensing that his fate had been decided, Smith was not surprised when a number of natives "layd hands on him, dragged him to [the stones], and thereon laid his head," apparently "ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines." At the last moment, of course, "when no intreaty could prevail," Pocahontas "got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death."[6]

The debate over the validity of this incident or Smith's embellishment of it has often raged. From an ethnohistorical point of view, Pocahontas probably did save Smith's life, but not out of any initial sense of love for the Englishman, as he may have misinterpreted. Rather, she was merely acting out a part in an established ritual. In matrilineal or semi-matrilineal native societies, the women of the clans made many important decisions, including the fate of captives. In the John Smith case, Pocahontas likely did not act on her own initiative, but followed a pre-arranged plan. Bringing the captive to the point of death and then permitting him to live represented an adoption ritual in native societies. As an indication of this intent, after sparing Smith's life, the chief demanded "two great gunnes, and a gryndstone, for which he would give him the Country of Capahowosick, and for ever esteme him as his sonne Nantaquoud."[7] Wahunsonnacock had no intention nor any reason to kill Smith, the leader of a group which supplied exotic and useful trade items. By threatening his captive with execution, however, and then allowing a young girl to intervene, the chieftain intended to impress upon Smith that he held the power of life and death over the Englishmen, as he did his other subjects. In doing so, as also in pronouncing Smith a subordinate werowance and son, Wahunsonnacock sought to insure the English captain's loyalty within his imperial system. Therefore, the John Smith-Pocahontas incident, which has been romanticized and exaggerated in literature, art, and legend, represented just an example of strong-armed diplomacy, one of many stratagems employed by Wahunsonnacock to make the English cooperate with and contribute to his expanding control in the region. He repeatedly attempted to remind and convince the colonists that "we [are] all friends and forever Powhatans."[8]

Smith, however, did not proceed according to the Powhatan's plans, and thus caused Wahunsonnacock considerable concern. The chieftain expected the English captain to appreciate the significance of the adoption ritual, but Smith did not become subordinate as Wahunsonnacock hoped. In addition, the chief had offered the new colony preferential treatment in comparison to his other subjects; whereas most tribes in the chiefdom annually paid up to "8 parts in 10 tribute of all the Commodities which their Country yeildeth," including corn, Wahunsonnacock demanded of the English only their surplus of hatchets, swords, trade beads, and the like.[9]

When they continued to show ingratitude and failed to cooperate, the great Powhatan complained to Smith, "I never used anie of [my] Werowances so kindlie as your selfe; yet from you, I receave the least kindnesse of anie." In the ever-persistent contest for supremacy, Smith strongly countered this charge. "Powhatan, you must knowe as I have but one God, I honour but one king," he responded, "and I live here not as your subject, but as your friend..."[10] Clearly, neither leader gained a psychological edge, despite their best efforts, but neither was willing to concede defeat.

While the Smith-Pocahontas incident represented the chieftain's most dramatic attempt to bring the invaders under his control, the English officials, for their part, also planned a grand display to impress their sovereignty upon the native leader. In 1608, the Virginia Company sent to Wahunsonnacock via Christopher Newport a cargo of gifts, including a "basin, ewer, bed and furniture, [a] scarlet cloake," and a crown. Newport planned to have the Powhatan travel to Jamestown to receive his gifts in a grand coronation ceremony which would have made the chieftain, in English minds at least, a subordinate prince to James I. From the start, however, Wahunsonnacock would have none of the scheme; when Smith requested his presence at Jamestown, the Powhatan objected haughtily. "If your king have sent me presents, I also am a king, and this [is] my land," he replied, and added perceptively, "Your father [Newport] is to come to me, not I to him; nor yet to your fort; neither will I bite at such a baite."

Not only did Wahunsonnacock spoil the colonists' plans to have the ceremony take place on their own turf, but he also refused to kneel to receive his crown. Smith blamed the delay on the native's ignorance of proper European protocol, "He neither knowing the majestie nor meaning of a Crowne, nor bending of the knee..." The English chronicler never considered the possibility that perhaps Wahunsonnacock simply would not prostrate himself before opposing leaders to whom he still felt superior. Finally, "by leaning hard on his shoulders, he a little stooped, and Newport put the Crowne on his head." Doubtless, the two English captains were glad to have the ordeal finished. But the Powhatan still had one more act to play out. Having been reluctantly squeezed into "his scarlet cloake and apparel ... to congratulate their kindnesse, he gave his old shoes and his mantle to Captain Newport."[11] Smith obviously felt that this gesture represented a simple act of reciprocal exchange, but even if so, it indicated that Wahunsonnacock did not view his position in the ceremony as that of a subordinate. Perhaps, however, he gave his clothes to Newport in an attempt to mock the English presumption in the affair. In any respect, Wahunsonnacock was not as simple-minded as some English observers seemed to imply.

This interpretation of the early relationship between the English and the Powhatans illustrates that even in such well-known events as those

described above, there were two sides at play. The Powhatans were not passive observers of English colonization, nor were they merely hostile opponents acting in a reactive manner to a perceived intrusion. Rather, the natives of eastern Virginia, as elsewhere, had their own sets of priorities, preconceptions, plans, and motivations — all very real, all very human — which guided them in their relations with European colonists and which in turn contributed to the course of events in colonial development, regardless of English plans or perceptions. Within this cultural framework, they made conscious decisions about what aspects of English civilization, or how much of it, to adopt and what to reject. Subsequent hostilities in Virginia occurred largely due to the threat posed when English advances exceeded the balance in the relationship the Indians were prepared to accommodate.

Why would the Indians have initiated relations at all? Wahunsonnacock wanted ultimate control over Tsenacommacah, and he was in the process of cementing his empire over *all* the inhabitants of the region when the English arrived. The colonists did not force their blue beads and copper kettles upon the natives, nor did they trick the Powhatans into commercial dependence. The natives were no strangers to a barter economy before European contact. They could have turned away, kept their corn, and refused to trade, but they did not. Wahunsonnacock liked what the colonists had to offer and saw them as a potential benefit to his imperial designs. The natives did not have to trade, but they chose to do so; and that decision greatly affected the course of cultural relations in the colony.

For instance, Wahunsonnacock's insistence that the colonists live near him most likely indicated his interest in trade. It was not enough for him to participate in the trade; he had to hold the initiative, grasp control.[12] Wahunsonnacock's most consistent desires were "great guns," swords, and a grindstone. The guns and swords may seem obvious, but he did not want them in order to destroy the colonists, as Smith suspected. He did not need them. He knew, and told Smith so, that if the natives hid their corn and retreated from trade, the English would "famish."[13] Had he wanted to destroy the colony at that time, he could easily have done so, by a variety of means. But the English weapons would give him a clear advantage over his native enemies. The grindstone would also prove practical to the Powhatan's power, since his authority rested on his economic dominance and his position as ultimate provider to his people.

Trade with the colonists was only attractive to Wahunsonnacock if he could control the pace and if it was channelled through him personally. How secure could Wahunsonnacock be if any subordinate chief could freely trade for firearms? How elevated could he appear if anyone could acquire the cherished blue beads? How safe could he feel if his enemies the Monacans obtained English weapons? The chieftain needed to control the

trade, and that explains a great deal of the diplomatic maneuvering described above.

Countless aspects of Anglo-Powhatan relations could be similarly discussed in various levels of detail. The central point is that in any topic of inter-cultural relationships we must recognize the impact and importance of native initiative and not view them as passive recipients or observers. As the ethnohistorical perspective suggests, in treating Indian topics in American history we must be sensitive both to the cultural integrity which formed the basis for decisions made by the natives in contact situations, as well as to the real and long-lasting effects of these native actions. These well-known and often repeated events in early Virginia history show that in any situation of cultural relations, two sides exist, and while both are worth telling, the fullest context and understanding comes in recognizing their mutual interaction.

Notes

1. See, James Axtell, "The Ethnohistory of Early America: A Review Essay," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd sers., 35(1978):110-144; James Axtell, "Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint," *Ethnohistory* 26(1979):1-13; Francis Jennings, "A Growing Partnership: Historians, Anthropologists, and American Indian History," *Ethnohistory* 29(1982):21-41; Bruce Trigger, "Ethnohistory: Problems and Prospects," *Ethnohistory* 29(1982)1-19.

2. J. Frederick Fausz, "The Powhatan Uprising of 1622: A Historical Study of Ethnocentrism and Cultural Conflict," PhD Dissertation: College of William and Mary, 1977, p. 59; Christian Feest, "Virginia Algonquians," in William C. Sturtevant, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians* 20 vols., (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), vol. 15, p. 254. William Strachey, *History of Travel into Virginia Britania* rpt: 1612, Louis B. Wright and Virginia Freund, eds. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), p. 56.

3. Ibid., pp. 57-63; John Smith, "A Map of Virginia (1612)," in Edward Arber, ed. *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith* 2 vols., (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910), vol. 1, p. 82; Nancy O. Lurie, "Indian Cultural Adjustment to European Civilization," in James M. Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 41; E. Randolph Turner, "An Archeological and Ethnohistorical Study on the Evolution of Rank Societies in the Virginia Coastal Plain," PhD Dissertation: Pennsylvania State University, 1976, p. 99; Conway W. Sams, *The Conquest of Virginia: The Forest Primeval* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), pp. 273-274.

4. John Smith, "A True Relation of Occurrences and Accidents in Virginia, 1608," in Arber, ed., *Travels and Works*, vol. 1, p. 20.

5. Ibid., pp. 25-26; Later, Wahunsonnacock told the colonists, "As for the Monacans, I can revenge my owne injuries," and told them that reports of salt water to the west were false. Smith, "Map of Virginia," p. 124; John Smith, "The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles," in Arber, ed., *Travels and Works*, vol. 2, p. 437.

6. Smith, "Generall Historie," vol. 2, p. 400.

7. Ibid., p. 401; The major indictments against Smith's story have been that his *True Travels* are also replete with beautiful young women saving and preserving him all over Turkey and Eastern Europe and that the Pocahontas incident did not appear in either of his first two Virginia publications, the "True Relation" (1608) or the "Map of Virginia" (1612). By the time the account first appeared in print, Smith was the only one of the principal actors still alive, Pocahontas and Wahunsonnacock having died in 1617 and 1618, respectively. The captain's defenders stress that the earlier histories were not actually composed by Smith but rather were written and edited from his notes by a London editor. Further, while acknowledging that neither Pocahontas nor her father were alive in 1624 to refute the story, proponents point out that several of his contemporaries at Jamestown lived in London at the time of the "Generall Historie's" publication. None of them expressed any opposition to Smith's story; in fact, Percy published a criticism of the work in 1625, but did not even mention what has become the most controversial passage. For the debate over the validity of the Smith-Pocahontas accounts, see, Frances Mossiker, *Pocahontas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), pp. 84-85; Philip L. Barbour, ed., *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith* 3 vols., (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), vol. 1, pp. 5-6, 195-197.

8. Smith, "Map of Virginia," p. 134; Smith, "Generall Historie," p. 451.

9. Strachey, *Travel into Virginia Britania*, p. 87; Fausz, "Powhatan Uprising," , p. 238.

10. Smith, "Map of Virginia," pp. 136-137; When Smith complained that Wahunsonnacock did not trade corn as promised, the chief responded, "some doubt I have of your comming hither, that makes me not so kindly seeke to relive you as I would: for many do informe me, your coming is not for trade but to invade my people and possess my Country." Ibid., p. 134; See also, Smith, "Generall Historie," pp. 451-453.

11. Smith, "Map of Virginia," pp. 124-125; Smith, "Generall Historie," pp. 437-438.

12. See, Smith, "Map of Virginia," pp. 102, 106, 130; Smith, "Generall Historie," pp. 406, 409, 447.

13. An Indian named Ocanindge once told Smith, "we know you cannot live if you want our harvest and that reliefe wee bring you." Smith, "Map of Virginia," p. 152; See, Ibid., pp. 135-136; Smith, "Generall Historie," pp. 452, 562; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), pp. 73-74.