

H-Net Reviews

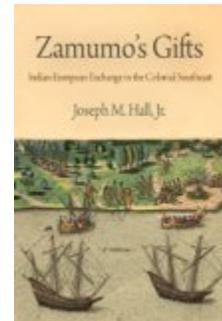
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph M. Hall. *Zamumo's Gifts: Indian-European Exchange in the Colonial Southeast*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. x + 232 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4179-2.

Reviewed by Tyler Boulware (West Virginia University)

Published on H-AmIndian (January, 2011)

Commissioned by Patrick G. Bottiger



The Power of Gifts

In *Zamumo's Gifts*, Joseph M. Hall Jr. highlights the centrality of gifts and trade to exchange networks that not only connected southeastern Indian towns but also native peoples to European colonizers. Hall is most interested in the “changing dynamics of giving and receiving,” the calculations of power that informed these exchanges, and the reconfiguration of political relationships that bound towns and empires to one another (p. 8). He succeeds on all three counts, although portions of the book remain speculative.

Hall's introduction is well crafted. He defines the geographic and temporal scope of his work, clearly lays out his argument, and identifies its contribution to the literature. The book's geographic focus is the piedmont region of central Georgia and Alabama. More specifically, it concerns those peoples situated between the Oconee Valley and the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Alabama Valleys. This strategic inland location allowed villagers to safeguard their autonomy while maintaining regular contact with the Spanish, English, and French colonizers in La Florida, Carolina, and La Louisiane, respectively, from the first Spanish *entrada* in 1513 to the rise of the *talwa*-centered Creek nation in the third quarter of the eighteenth century.

Hall's argument is multifaceted and, on a broad level, quite convincing. Traditionally, gifts were powerful objects that could secure chiefly authority and village autonomy by demonstrating a community's connections to

outsiders. The arrival of Europeans with their commercial understandings of price and profit did not immediately alter the meaning of gifts or exchange. Rather, “Indians and Europeans blended commercial and diplomatic norms,” whereby gift-giving and trade reflected a mutually created relationship (p. 5). Even well into the eighteenth century, when gifts became commodities that bound peoples together in market relations, southeastern Indians “had not abandoned the power of gifts” as they “continued to insist on practices that were both older than and distinct from European logics of the market” (p. 5). In this manner, Hall stresses cultural continuity and Indian agency. Native peoples did not become economically or politically subordinate to Europeans, as earlier scholarship often posits, but instead effectively manipulated trade networks that rested largely in their hands (p. 9).

Hall organizes his narrative chronologically. He begins by examining “the power of exchange and the resilience of local autonomy” throughout the Mississippian Southeast (p. 14). Since gifts cemented relationships between giver and recipient, chiefs used these objects to maintain stability within the community and to acquire allies beyond the town. Townspeople, or “commoners,” also contributed to these processes by negotiating “the bonds that held their towns together,” which “in turn influenced exchanges among towns” (p. 22).

With the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth cen-

tury, the “spirit of giving” continued amid a fracturing Mississippian world (p. 32). In keeping with earlier themes, Hall argues that leaders such as Zamumo, the chief of Altamaha, sought to preserve town security and autonomy through exchange with outsiders, which now included the Spanish. Conquistadors at first tried to extract resources rather than engage in reciprocity, but native resistance eventually forced Spanish colonizers to abandon military conquest in favor of offering gifts (p. 33). Hall thus questions scholarly assumptions that southeastern Indians had little impact on the cooperative relationship Spaniards pursued with native peoples (p. 181, n. 2). He also challenges those scholars who believe Spain’s regional influence was limited (pp. 181-182, n. 3). Hall instead sees St. Augustine as “the center of a new network of exchange that linked town squares to the Atlantic outpost” (p. 34).

A new set of relations emerged, however, once Spaniards, especially those with ties to Havana, began trading with native peoples to supplement gift exchange. Hall reveals how these newcomers did not offer their objects as “gifts in exchange for political allegiance but as trade goods in exchange for corn and deerskins” (p. 56). Southeastern Indians welcomed this trade, in part because it helped to secure alliances but also because it enabled “commoners” to acquire goods and the symbolic power they possessed. Although chiefs still benefited most from Spanish gifts and trade, the democratization of trade provided non-elites the means to challenge chiefly authority. It also gave them the ability to strengthen “some of the bonds that tied towns together” (p. 73). The role of non-elites in the creation of intertown alliances took on added significance once slave raiders and the slave trade swept over the region.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, English-sponsored slave raiders from the north, particularly the Westos, destabilized the region. The pace quickened with the establishment of South Carolina and its aggressive capitalists. The traffic in humans exploded—now dominated by a new people, the Yamasees—which led to widespread death and displacement. Natives throughout the Southeast responded by drawing “upon the networks of gifts, trade, and alliance that held individual towns and the region as a whole together” (p. 77). More specifically, they realized that security and autonomy were safeguarded not by European colonizers but by each other; in other words, they “found they were best off in the company of other Native towns” (p. 102). The people who would become the “Creeks” especially sought to create intertown alliances that “improved its members’

access to and protection from the powerful Carolinians and their violent trade” (p. 107).

The Yamasee War proved to be the climactic event for these processes as it resulted in three key developments for the region. First, the war spurred the reorganization of communities, leading to the formation of the Creek people. A “new nation” was subsequently born out of the maelstrom of war and the postwar reform of Indian relations (p. 118). Second, the Yamasee War “destroyed the slave trade and Carolinians’ pretensions of regional hegemony” (p. 118). This factor figured into the third consequential development: the play-off diplomacy Creeks would employ toward their English, French, and Spanish neighbors. This “new postwar order” based on multilateralism, Hall writes, was “one in which no European colony enjoyed a distinct advantage and in which many Indian towns reaffirmed a once vulnerable autonomy”—sentiments echoed in Steven Hahn’s *The Invention of the Creek Nation* (2004) (p. 129).

Zamumo’s Gifts is well written and intellectually engaging. Hall utilizes a vast array of archaeological and archival materials that he supplements with Creek written and oral histories and his own personal communications with Muscogeans. A series of well-placed, sequential maps assists the reader in tracking the locations of towns and peoples in the region. No bibliography is included but the endnotes are easy to maneuver and highly informative. Hall’s work is likewise noteworthy because it makes several contributions to the field of southeastern Indian history. First, it adds to a growing body of literature that emphasizes Indian agency and places indigenous peoples at the center of study. Second, it uncovers the “complex and shifting blends of ritual and commercial norms” held by Indians and Europeans to upend the false dichotomy of “primitive, gift-giving Indians and manipulative, commercial Europeans” (pp. 5, 7). Hall additionally underscores the ways that native peoples shaped the development of empire in the colonial Southeast—a topic that only recently has begun to receive proper treatment. The book also covers a broad expanse of time, which includes the largely “forgotten” seventeenth century. This allows Hall to connect Mississippian chiefdoms to newly constructed eighteenth-century polities, or nations, inhabited by the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Catawba. Throughout, Hall reminds us that village politics and the building of intertown alliances was not simply the consequence of Indian-European exchange but also the result of diverse interactions between native peoples.

While Hall provides a convincing account of exchange in the early Southeast, some of his interpretations rest on shaky foundations. To his credit, Hall readily admits the evidentiary support is at times limited, but the overabundance of speculative language (“seems likely,” “perhaps,” “probably,” “may have,” “suggests,” “tantalizing hints,” etc.), particularly in the book’s first three chapters, calls into question some of his claims. I am not certain, for instance, that John Lawson’s observations concerning the eighteenth-century Carolina piedmont can provide accurate descriptions of Mississippian intertown exchange (p. 26). Nor am I convinced by discussions about the public roles of Mississippian women that stem from analyses of colonial-era Cherokees and Iroquois (p.

23).

These are just a few of the many examples throughout the work in which no records exist to corroborate the story. Still, I find myself in agreement with many of Hall’s conjectures. One has to admire and perhaps even envy his ability to offer such insightful interpretations, particularly when faced with a “documentary silence” (p. 71).

Exchange, particularly within the context of gifts and trade, was arguably the defining feature of Indian-European contact throughout the colonial era. *Zamumo’s Gifts* does justice to these constantly evolving nexus of relationships. It is a book that deserves attention.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian>

Citation: Tyler Boulware. Review of Hall, Joseph M., *Zamumo’s Gifts: Indian-European Exchange in the Colonial Southeast*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32134>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.