Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea Reconsidered

Ethnohistorians have long grappled with the mythological construct of the European explorer entering an Indian village, bedding a chief’s daughter, and ultimately founding a nation in the Americas by both acts. Rebecca Jager has grappled with this issue afresh in a masterful way in her recent work. She takes an in-depth look at three well-known Indian women of the Americas: Malinche from sixteenth-century Mesoamerica, Pocahontas from the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, and Sacagawea from the nineteenth-century West. Equally as important, she addresses the changing views of later generations about these women in art, history, film, and modern fiction.

In a 1992 article in *Ethnohistory* (vol. 39) titled “Indian Women as Cultural Mediators,” Dr. Clara Sue Kidwell (Choctaw/Chippewa) introduced the idea of the Indian woman as culture broker, dually transmitting information about her own culture to non-Indians within her territory while absorbing critical elements of non-Indian culture. Jager has taken the concept further to try and separate the truth of indigenous women’s lives from a mythology that, in some cases, served in nation-building efforts and, in other cases, changed over time in response to different interpretations of the women.

The book is organized into preliminary chapters which examine each woman’s life in the context of her own culture. It pays special attention to Native gender roles, which were quite different from those of Euroamerican women. Jager also looks at the sexuality of the women. She notes that several Native American societies believed that women, whose sexuality was their own to express, could transfer the power from these powerful non-Indians to their peoples. The author analyzes each woman’s role in these areas through the themes of first encounters, cultural mediation, and relationship interactions. Similarly, Jager addresses the mythology which arose about each woman in three different chapters.

Although the work has more than one thesis, a general theme is that most indigenous women could have done the work of a culture broker as carried out by the three subjects that Jager studies. They were neither as
special nor as different from the other women of their culture as the non-Indian male visitors in their territory perceived them to be. Further, these women did not surrender to the non-Indian men who came into their territory because they understood that these men’s cultures and missions were, respectively, superior to the Native cultures they encountered and more glorious than their destinies. Rather, Jager believes these women simply chose to perform the work they had been trained to do to minimize friction between the foreign cultures and their own. In the case of Malinche, Jager shows that this culture broker probably believed the Cortes mission would free the Aztec Empire’s unwilling subject peoples from its domination.

Jager had her greatest amount of material to work with concerning Malinche and the latter therefore receives the most attention. While many may be familiar with the rise of the Aztec empire, Malinche’s life story as the daughter of a Nahua chief sold by her mother after her father’s death will be new to some. This material supports Jager’s thesis that Malinche and the other two women learned to adapt quickly to changing times and conditions, like the arrival of non-Indians in their homelands. She spoke Nahuatl originally, including a high version used by leaders, due to her having received an elite education commensurate with her father’s status and close interactions with the Aztec Empire, and her sale to Maya traders allowed her to pick up several new dialects, priming her for future service as a culture broker. Thus, the great dichotomy concerning Malinche’s role in Mexican history, in the words of the author, positions her as both “the selfish whore who brought down indigenous Mexico and the virtuous Catholic Mother of a new Mestizo race” (p. 32). Interesting side stories that come out of the Malinche material include a discussion of an Aztec goddess, Malinalxochitl, whom Native peoples in Aztec territory may have thought Malinche was, based upon name similarity. These same people addressed Malinche as Malintzin, adding an honorific suffix to her name.

Jager effectively shows how Malinche aided Hernán Cortés with far more than mere translation. She clearly informed him of regional rivalries such as the one between the Tlaxcala and the Aztecs. This inside information allowed Cortés to fine-tune his message and his mission. Malinche broadcast a message to new leaders that allowed Cortés to fine-tune his message and his mission. Malinche broadcast a message to new leaders that allowed Cortés to fine-tune his message and his mission.

Turning to Pocahontas brings Jager’s focus onto United States history. Pocahontas was much younger than Malinche, but shared similarly high status as the daughter of Chief Powhatan, a leader who had cobbled together his confederacy, Tsenacommacah, in his lifetime, partly through marriage alliances. Thus, his daughters likely expected to be married to other Tsenacommacah Confederacy leaders. Jager points out that Powhatan (Wahunsonacock) had a child with each political wife and let the child remain with the mother’s tribe until she was old enough to learn, at which time her life changed again as she was brought to Powhatan’s household. Such evidence supports Jager’s theory that the women culture brokers she studies learned at early ages to adapt to quickly changing times and environments.

Native gender roles were quite different and colonist William Strachey’s account of a prepubescent, naked Pocahontas turning cartwheels at James Fort fully illustrates the level of difference. While most have heard of the episode in which Pocahontas saved John Smith by interposing her body between his and the executioner, Jager analyzes this incident in great detail. Some theories consider the mock execution as an attempt to shock Smith into becoming more malleable. Jager believes the event to be a rebirthing ceremony, called the Nikomis, which was meant to make Smith a Powhatan weroance, or chieftain, and to bring to an end his food raids upon various villages. Thus, she was carrying out a ritual important in her own culture which, in this case, was aimed at preventing a violent conclusion to Smith’s aggressive acts against Powhatan villages.

Jager also tackles the private life of Pocahontas, again by using the records of William Strachey over those of Smith. Strachey notes that Pocahontas by 1612 was the young bride of a Potomac man, Kocoum, who is seldom mentioned in standard recounts of the Pocahontas story. As a young woman, Pocahontas was already fulfilling the role of a culture broker, which Jager chooses to call a “Beloved Woman,” a term often used synonymously with the term Ghighau among the Cherokees (p. 102). The author notes that when Powhatans and Virginia settlers
had a conflict in May of 1608. Chief Powhatan quickly dispatched Pocahontas to settle accounts with Smith. The tactic worked because Smith made it clear that he had released his Powhatan prisoners “as a gesture to her [Pocahontas] and because of his great respect for her father” (p. 104).

Jager also recounts the year-long captivity of Pocahontas, who was placed in the care of Reverend Alexander Whitaker. John Rolfe, a recent arrival, whose infant daughter and wife had died during the transatlantic crossing to North America, spent time in the company of Whitaker and became involved in Pocahontas’s life as her English-language instructor. Jager provides a clever analysis of how Kocoum complicated the virgin Indian bride role that Native women were later to play in US national mythology. If Pocahontas was the mother of the people of the United States, she was not a virgin bride. Some of Pocahontas’s descendants have tackled the issue of what happened to Kocoum, a point to be discussed later at the end of this review. As in the Cortés and Malinche story, Rolfe and Pocahontas united, which brought peace to the James Fort and Powhatan communities, a period the colonists called “Pocahontas’s peace” (pp. 138-139).

Turning finally to Sacagawea, the author has a subject who was a young married woman expecting her first child at the time of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Sacagawea was born in Idaho among the Lemhi Shoshones and was first called Boo-wy-ee-puh, which meant “grass woman.” Promised at birth to a male in her tribe, which included a bride price payment in horses, she was to remain with her family until eligible for marriage. During this time, the Hidatsas took her captive and removed her hundreds of miles east to near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. Living in a new culture, Sacagawea was forced to learn new gender rules, customs, and languages. She lived among the Hidatsas until they traded her to a French Canadian trader, Toussaint Charbonneau, with whom the Hidatsas wished to open long-term trade. When the Lewis and Clark Expedition arrived, Sacagawea was approximately sixteen and pregnant; she had been married to Charbonneau for two years.

During their first winter camp, members of the expedition saw Native American women pursuing their work in farming and stereotyped them as the “squaw drudges” that Jager challenges throughout her work (pp. 8, 78). Charbonneau, once hired, threatened to quit during the first winter camp. When Lewis and Clark rehired him, it was with the idea that Sacagawea was the one who was too potentially useful to lose. When the expedition pulled out of its first winter camp, Sacagawea was listed as an “interpreteress” (p. 113). By fall 1805, William Clark noted in his journal, “the presence of Sacagawea with the expedition convinces all Indian people of the peaceful intentions of their party” (p. 115). In truth, the presence of a woman and a baby was an almost universally understood signal in Indian country announcing the non-hostile intentions of an otherwise armed group of males. Journal records indicate she worked steadily to procure and process food for the group on a daily basis.

If not already clear, Sacagawea’s value became apparent when the expedition reached her childhood homelands, where the captains hoped to buy horses from the Lemhi Shoshones. As it turns out, the chief at the time, Cameahwait, was Sacagawea’s brother and so the mission signaled more than just the arrival of random visitors to the Lemhi River valley. The expedition restored someone important to the chief. Further, the captains sent their hunters out along with Shoshone hunters and the group returned with meat for all. During this mutual cooperation, Sacagawea learned that her brother had changed his mind about immediately supplying the expedition with horses and Sacagawea reported this to the expedition through Charbonneau. For Jager, the information illustrates Sacagawea’s commitment to the mission and her position as intermediary.

The author then tackles the legacy of Sacagawea by following her story through the years after her death. After assessing this, Jager takes the Shoshone woman’s story forward to a ceremony in May 1999 in which First Lady Hillary Clinton unveiled the new coin bearing a woman artist’s rendition of Sacagawea put forth by the US Mint. Mrs. Clinton stated, “As we honor and remember the life and contributions of Sacagawea, we pay tribute as well to other Native American women who have carried on her role as path makers and breakers” (p. 288).

For the most part, Jager proves her multiple theses in this work about pathmakers and pathbreakers. She convincingly concludes that these women were high-functioning culture brokers in their societies, just as they would have been even if non-Indians had never come to their communities. Jager cannot quite give a name to what these women became through their extended service to outsiders over time. Such service took their role of culture broker to new levels of cultural diplomacy. What each of her biography subjects became is really a paramount diplomat. Historians need a different phrase
to honor and describe these women and “paramount diplomat” correctly conveys that status.

This is an important work that needs to be on the bookshelves of historians of both Native American and women’s history. In terms of weaknesses, they are few and not critical in nature. The author uses the term “Indian princess” enough in the Pocahontas material that it made me uncomfortable at times. We know that Europeans thought these women were Indian princesses but, at some point in the work, the line blurred and Jager does not refute the false status enough. A chief’s daughter is a chief’s daughter, not a princess, and that reference—a slight to Native culture—should be corrected wherever it occurs. Because the work keeps analyzing the women and their cultures prior to foreign contact, during the period of service to an expedition or mission, and then afterwards, it is also fairly repetitive with its organizational structure as she revisits the three case studies in the same order.

Rebecca Jager has done both Native studies and women’s studies a great service with her work, though there is still much yet to be done in understanding the whole truth of the lives of Native American women. In 2007, co-authors Dr. Lindwood Custalow and Angela L. Daniel published a book entitled *The True Story of Pocahontas, The Other Side of History*. This short monograph by members of the Pamunkey Nation offered an alternative version of the Pocahontas story. For much of the work, the story parallels the standard story of the Pocahontas legend, but with two stunning exceptions. The authors assert that Pocahontas already had a son by her husband Kocoum and that the James Fort English killed this first husband to free Pocahontas for marriage to an English man.[1] They also claim that Governor Thomas Dale raped her in captivity and, with a resulting pregnancy, had to find a suitable man to marry her quickly such as John Rolfe.[2] Ironically, her son’s name was Thomas. Luckily for those intrigued by Rebecca Jager’s work, there are many more stories like these waiting to be teased from the records.

Notes


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