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HIST 198 A

Hope Leslie Essay

10/19/06

Pequot: The Beginning of Tribal Assimilation

The Pequots were probably one of the first tribes to deal with English settlement. They endured a change in lifestyle, like the trading of materialistic items, to their almost extinction. Which set a future precedence for all other Native American tribes in their dealings with future ethnic cleansing from whites.

“The Indians of North America are, perhaps, the only race of men of whom it may be said, that though conquered, they were never enslaved. They could not submit, and live. When made captives, they courted death, and exulted in torture.”¹

The Pequot's, which translates into the destroyers in the eastern Algonquian language, resided in eastern Connecticut and extreme northeastern Rhode Island. However the tribe known as Mohegan, translating into wolf in Algonquian, originally belonged to the same group as the Pequot, they shared the same ancestry and dialect, but split after the arrival of Europeans. In 1620, one group of Pequot rebelled against Sassacus, the Pequot chief, and moved to another location on the Thames. This group established an independent village and became know as the Mohegan. The Mohegan and Pequot, though closely related, remained enemies and frequently fought on opposing sides in various colonial wars.²

Their religion relied on Medicine Men, called powwows. Who had a spiritual

1 Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, Carolyn L. Karcher, 1998, pg. 3

2 William B. Kessel and Robert Wooster, *Encyclopedia of Native American Wars and Warfare*. (New York: Books Builders Incorporated, 2005). Pg. 217

connection to the creator, and used herbs, sweats, plants, and songs to cure illnesses and banish evil spirits. This is a form of religion still commonly used today in many Native American tribes.

The dwelling of the Pequot's were usually located on hills and often palisaded. As Magawisca described, "our fortress-homes were on the level summit of a hill. Thence we could see as far as the eye could stretch, our hunting grounds, and our gardens, which lay beneath us on the borders of a stream that glided around our hill, and so near to it, that in the still nights we could hear its gentle voice. Our fort and wigwams were encompassed with a palisade, formed of young trees, and branches interwoven and sharply pointed. No enemy's foot had ever approached this nest, which the eagles of the tribe had built for their mates and their young".³ Their beddings consisted of skins and mats laid directly on the floor. Cooking pots were placed on poles suspended on forked sticks driven into the ground.

For their diet the Pequot women grew corns, beans, and squash while the men grew tobacco. They also made stew by using the corn they grew, and cornmeal was made into cakes and baked in hot ashes. Gathering shellfish was common along the coast in the summer, along with the occasional pleasure of catching beached whale. Although deer was the animal staple, men hunted an enormous variety of large and small game as well as fowl, the latter including turkey, quail, pigeon, and geese. Deer were stalked and may have been hunted in communal drives.⁴ Also complementing the diet were fish, and wild vegetables, nuts, and berries.

The Pequot's were equipped with the use of hickory or witch hazel bows and

³ Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, Carolyn L. Karcher, 1998, pg. 48

⁴ Barry M. Pritzker, "The Northeastern Woodlands", *A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000), pg. 458.

arrows tipped with flint, bone, shell, or eagle claws. Fish were captured with nets, spears, and bone hooks. Rush baskets, carved wood bowls and utensils, Indian hemp cordage and twined baskets, wooden mortars, pottery jars, and stone woodworking tools were other key items used in Pequot daily life. This was their key technology in catching and storing food. However they did use birch bark canoes with the dugout variety as transportation when they needed to travel along the river or to the coast.

Pequot dress was that of the “typical image we have of Indians” with the concentration of white-tailed deer, which furnished most of the people’s clothing. The men generally wore breechclouts, leggings (in winter), and moccasins; women wore skirts or dresses and moccasins.⁵ However both donned fur robes in cold weather. Their clothing was often decorated with quillwork as well as feathers, paints, and shells. To decorate with the quillwork, women plucked, soaked, softened, and dyed porcupine quills to decorate their clothing. The jewelry was made from shell, bone, and other material. This can be seen in Sedgwick’s description of Magawisca, “her hair contrary to the fashion of the Massachusetts Indians, was parted on her forehead, braided, and confined to her head by a band of small feathers, jet black, and interwoven, and attached at equal distances by rings of polished bone. She wore a waistcoat of deer-skin, fastened at the throat by a richly wrought collar. A mantle of purple cloth hung gracefully from her shoulders, and was confined at the waist by a broad band, ornamented with rude hieroglyphics. The mantle and her strait short petticoat or kilt of the same rare and costly material, had been obtained, probably, from the English traders. The moccasins, neatly fitted to a delicate foot and ankle, and tastefully ornamented with bead-work, completed

⁵ Ibid, pg. 458

the apparel of this daughter of a chieftain".⁶

Magawisca acquired some of her clothing through trade because they were part of long-standing ancient trade networks. They engaged in little long-distance trade. Some of their trade items included clay pots, carved wood bowls, chestnuts, and wampum (whelk and quahog shells that were ground into beads using stone drills). Wampum had ceremonial and mnemonic uses before it became a symbol of status and a medium of exchange in the post contact period.⁷

The Pequot Indians were one of the most militaristic of the southern New England tribes and thus dreaded by non-Indians.⁸ Most of their weapons however were the bow and arrow, which was the basic weapon, along with spears and clubs. Guns were also acquired through European settlers when they were given the opportunity. Enemies of the Pequot's were the Long Island Montauk, the Narragansett's, and the Niantic. They only had a few known allies.

Warfare in most Indian cultures, was a matter of one man against another; warriors fought as individuals for personal glory rather than as a unit for larger objectives. The idea of fighting in lines against artillery was therefore not part of the Native American warrior culture.⁹ Battles were fought for a variety of reasons, such as revenge, honor, or the acquisition of horses once introduced by the Spanish, and other property. The techniques of Indians were less structured than the regular rules of combat most English were accustomed to. Their styles of combat were more along the lines of ambushes, surprise attacks and some from cliffs, and not open fighting like those of some

6 Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, Carolyn L. Karcher, 1998, pg. 23

7 Barry M. Pritzker, "The Northeastern Woodlands", *A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000), pg. 458

8 William B. Kessel and Robert Wooster, *Encyclopedia of Native American Wars and Warfare*. (New York: Books Builders Incorporated, 2005), pg. 245

9 Ibid, pg. 245

English settlers. Plus their knowledge of the land helped them tremendously in escaping or defeating some settlers.

The Pequot War which was rooted in landownership, and the problem was exacerbated by a power struggle between rival and rapidly expanding English settlements in southern New England; there was also an ongoing struggle for dominance among various Indian tribes. The combination produced a volatile situation.¹⁰ With the killing of John Stone, an English trader, only took importance when the Massachusetts Bay authorities figured the incident might be used to political advantage in their negotiations with the Pequots. Which demanded the surrendering of Stone's killers and a large wampum payment. However only a portion was paid, and only two of the killers were still alive elsewhere. Uncas, chief of the Mohegans told the English false statements (their allies) that the Pequots were preparing for war.

The war's decisive engagement took place in May, when ninety Connecticut militia and some three hundred Indian allies surrounded the majority of the Pequot tribe in their palisaded village on the Mystic River. In a surprise attack at dawn, the colonists set fire to the village, then killed the Pequot as they emerged from the flames.¹¹ Only several villagers survived and some were taken captive.

The almost total destruction of the Pequot tribe opened the Connecticut frontier to settlement and acknowledged the colonists as the dominant military power in New England.¹² Dealing with the warfare and diseases of Europeans many American Indian tribes were losing vast numbers and even diminishing. This led to the seizure of land by

10 Jerry Keenan, *Encyclopedia of American Indian Wars 1942-1890* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997), pg. 165

11 Ibid, pg. 166

12 William B. Kessel and Robert Wooster, *Encyclopedia of Native American Wars and Warfare*. (New York: Books Builders Incorporated, 2005), pg. 246

English Puritan settlers for example in the Massachusetts area or Connecticut from these diminishing tribes.

Hope Leslie is set in the aftermath of the Pequot War but I thought it would be best to explain it to get a sense for the feelings of chief Mononotto toward his once allied friends, the English. Magawisca was one of the Pequot people to be taken as a servant by English settlers along with her brother Oneco. They were to become servants to the Fletcher family. She develops a real lasting friendship with two people in particular, Hope Leslie and Everell Fletcher who help save her many times.

After the massacre at Mystic River, Mononotto deals with the fact that he will have to at once fully ally himself with his people and no longer the English since they killed all his men tribes peoples women and children, and only his were one of the ones to survive. Also one of the American Indians key motives for fighting was revenge. So when Magawisca is telling Everell of her horrific story of when the English came upon their quiet homes she says, "Then listen to me; and when the hour of vengeance comes, if it should come, remember it was provoked".¹³ Mononotto must reclaim the lives of his people so he sets forth to Bethel and attacks, killing all of William Fletcher's family except Everell and Faith Leslie, and frees his children. However Sedgwick's narrative strategy fosters recognition of the two people's common humanity with parallels between Indian and white characters which invites readers to view the races in the same light.¹⁴ Accordingly, the old medicine woman Nelema, the Pequot chief Mononotto, and the Puritan William Fletcher all lose their families in wanton massacres, and which they must deal with the coexistence of each others race.

13 Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, Carolyn L. Karcher, 1998, pg. 48

14 Ibid, pg. xxi

However Magawisca and Hope Leslie, her twinned heroines, have to try and deal with their struggle to decide between loyalty to their respective families and peoples and to their friends on the opposite side of the racial divide.¹⁵ Magawisca deals with this in her consideration of helping Everell escape. They both constantly deal with betraying their own race according to their views and lifestyle. Magawisca deals with this when she sacrifices herself to save Everell and severs her arm and when she helps him escape his execution from her people. Even Hope is constantly contemplating this in her actions when she helps both Nelema and Magawisca escape from the jail. They have a strong friendship or sister-ness which evokes this idea to help one another.

Sedgwick's significance of her depiction of American Indians in early American history is important because she tries to address a very important issue that was still existing in contemporary American history, and that is the idea of the "Indian problem". Throughout *Hope Leslie* she tries to consider solutions to the problem. The first solution she considers is peaceful coexistence which involves mutually beneficial exchanges of goods and services. For example, the relationship Nelema established with Martha Fletcher. She supplies Mrs. Fletcher with wild berries and herbs in return for blankets or occasionally a meal. Nelema and just Indians in general have knowledge of herbal medicine. So when Hope's tutor Mr. Cradock is bitten by a rattlesnake she turns to Nelema for help. However the result demonstrates that Puritans cannot tolerate any contact with a race labeled as satanic--any reciprocity that might expose Christian to "heathen" practices.¹⁶ So that solution evidently fails because of the settler's failure to coexist.

15 Ibid, pg. xxi

16 Ibid, pg. xxii

Interracial marriage is the second solution offered by Sedgwick. An example of this is Faith Leslie's interracial marriage to Oneco. Though it is despite her expression of "modesty," is in some sense a fallen woman and that she, too, is wearing a disguise (her Indian costume) that marks her as transgressive.¹⁷ There is also the thought of Everell and Magawisca as a more promising example of interracial marriage because they embody the best traits of their respective peoples. Their relationship heralds the cultural enrichment both whites and Indians might derive from intermingling by Everell teaching her to read, and Magawisca telling Everell of her customs. Their intermarriage could have happened before Mononotto's killing of his family and his return to England. Ultimately it is Magawisca's rescue of Everell that most decisively bars her from marrying him.

The barriers of interracial marriage are still present today, and the barriers of Indian women not being good enough to marry a white man unless she can meet certain standards that put her up to his level. An example which might put her up there is higher education. This theme is commonly seen in present day film depictions. For example, in *Dances With Wolves*, Kevin Costner is surrounded by all these beautiful Indian women but yet he still has to fall in love with the "white Indian".

Yet her third solution of cross-racial friendship is said to be the solution to the Indian problem. Throughout her novel a sisterhood unfolds between Hope Leslie and Magawisca. Is this the solution because the brotherly-sisterly friendship that links Magawisca to Everell and Hope does not isolate either party; both remain connected to their families and communities.¹⁸ However "Friendly" whites like Hope and Everell,

17 Ibid, pg. xxiii

18 Ibid, pg. xxvi

they intimate, threaten Indian survival as much as do outright persecutor, and perhaps even more so, because they naively counsel trust in white good faith.¹⁹ This solution neither works because cross-racial friendship needs to be offered by all of the white English settlers otherwise Indians get the misconception that all are friendly and put trust into all of them when they are historically dealt with in deceptions.

In contemporary issues of the Indian problem the government was still having that problem and we seen it in their assimilation, termination, reorganization acts/policies of dealing with the problem of what to do with American Indians, and it has that constant shift between helping and assimilating American Indians. On the other hand Sedgwick looks into the Indian problem early on.

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. xxvi