

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat. By Paula Gunn Allen.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7f7523tb>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 28(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Sharpes, Donald K.

Publication Date

2004-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat. By Paula Gunn Allen. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 2003. 350 pages. \$26.95 cloth; \$15.95 paper.

Pocahontas is one of the most romantic, enchanting, and enigmatic figures in American history. She is the consummate bicultural individual, a woman who knew intimately European and Native cultures and who, as far as we know, was the first Native person to learn English; to become a Christian; to marry an Englishman, John Rolfe, and have his child; and then journey to England with her new husband and son. She is the epitome of a person bridging two cultures and transforming both with her presence and charisma. Her bloodline persists, with more than four hundred descendants as we begin her seventeenth generation, and one of her direct ancestors, John Rolfe, was a student of mine in 2001. As if coincidence was not enough, my daughter teaches at John Rolfe Middle School in Richmond, Virginia.

Professor Allen's intriguing hypothesis that Pocahontas was a medicine woman and enchantress casts a different glow on the story of her integration into English culture and her legendary status as an American icon. Allen has done a unique service by giving an enlightened perspective into the mindset of Native peoples, its spiritual component especially, and infusing it into this inspiring story of love and cultural communion with allegories and literary comparisons. She intimates that what linked Pocahontas and Rolfe were the spirit powers in tobacco, and she captures a key to this classic cultural encounter.

Allen cleverly compares Pocahontas to Malinalli, who escorted Hernan Cortes and had a child by him, and to Sacagewea, who served as Native guide for Lewis and Clark. She links Pocahontas's abduction to other literary parallels, such as Helen and Guinevere. Her knowledge of English literature serves her well when she alludes to mythical tales such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to show how unseen forces, like dream-vision occurrences, enter into human affairs.

Allen links the medicine power of the Dream Vision people as a way of connecting Native narrative conventions, particularly the supernatural conditions of Native consciousness. But in emphasizing Native oral traditions she needlessly disparages the science and methods of historical investigation. It's true that over time the lack of details and the imaginative bias of biographers have created more legend than insight about Pocahontas. But this is true of all oral traditions; by the time they have become transformed into written records, they have apocryphal elements.

The attempt to inject a new perspective into the life of Pocahontas and her possible role as a priestess, and the compelling delineation of the spiritual side of Native culture, is an ambitious objective and an essential and recurrent theme. Nevertheless, this hypothetical rendition has its imperfections, not the least of which is that Allen tries to characterize this young woman, barely out of her teens, with as many roles—medicine woman, spy, entrepreneur, and diplomat, as the subtitles show—as Ben Franklin had.

Allen's knowledge of English literature is helpful in making comparisons between mythical elements in the life of Pocahontas and Sir Gawain, but the comparison is stretched thin and hence is ineffective. Once she strays into the domain of comparative mythology, her lack of scholarship in both theory and practice, with the exception of only one of Joseph Campbell's books (and not his most influential), is glaringly revealed.

But even when she speaks of Western narrative as a contrast to Native narrative, Professor Allen shows a weakness in understanding historiography. It is not just so-called Western narratives that include a central character or a "trickster," as anyone familiar with the famous *Journey to the West*, the thousand-year-old Chinese literary gem that tells the story of how Buddhist scriptures came to China, will know. Such narrative devices are standard in nearly all mythical epics, beginning with *Gilgamesh*, the ancient Sumerian epic that scribes used in retelling the biblical creation myth.

Likewise, the stories about Sky Woman, First Woman, and Corn Woman, stories of fertility and largesse, are not unique to Native myths but are ubiquitous in all mythic literature, beginning with Istar among the Babylonians, Persephone among the Greeks, Ceres among the Romans, and Hathor among the Egyptians. Myths, legends, songs, dances, and poetry recounting these tales all have deep historical roots, and a scholar of history, myth, or literature would be familiar with such similarities among all Native peoples. The so-called Western accounts are not, as Allen claims, "masculine" in descriptions of fertility myths.

Allen tries unsuccessfully to draw a sharp and divisive contrast between what she calls "Western" and Native and Algonquin beliefs. More precisely, these so-called Western ideas originated geographically in western Asia, in Babylonia, and in north Africa, primarily Egypt. Her characterizations, however, reveal an ignorance or neglect of these ancient histories, religions, and myths that, had she had even a cursory knowledge of, would have demonstrated that ancient religious beliefs and myths are more similar to Native beliefs, for example, about the role of the feminine in religion, about fertility goddesses, about the power and use of intoxicants in religion (like Bacchus, the Greek wine god, creating visions for initiates into the Eleusian mysteries), and about the strength of spirituality in human affairs. If Allen had acknowledged these similarities, the contrast between the long histories of European and Native animistic beliefs would diminish and the cultural comparison evaporate.

Moreover, history and biography are not, as Allen claims, a Christian-based capitalistic democracy. Historical writing originates with Herodotus in the sixth century BCE, and some of the most stylistic and ingenious historians were Thucydides, Tacitus, Plutarch, and Suetonius, among other Greek and Romans, none of whom were Christian or democratic in thinking or practice.

There is always a danger in projecting a contemporary culture backwards in time. Americans today are not at all like the English settlers at Jamestown four hundred years ago. Similarly, assuming that Native culture, even with a few known cultural elements, is similar to Native culture four hundred years

ago is highly speculative. We need to be as cautious peering backwards and making assumptions as we are about predicting the future.

There are noticeable contextual ambiguities, some torturous syntax, multiple redundancies, and regrettable word use (such as *gonna*) that mar the text. At times, Allen wanders over an expanded landscape with more asides and tangents than there are chapters. For example, why is it necessary to discuss the plague of 1348–50 to try to connect that disastrous event with an astrological symbol that is without historical foundation and seems out of place and distracting?

Petroglyphs and pictographs are not synonymous as Allen notes. Pictographs are representative drawings of animals or humans. Petroglyphs are symbols, and the meanings of most are unknown. Neither is a “text,” as Allen claims, although clearly the rock etchings have meaning.

Key primary texts, like William Strachey’s 1612 travelogue, John Smith’s own general history of Virginia, and John Rolfe’s book *True Relation of the State of Virginia* are fleetingly noted in the text or endnotes but unavailable in the references, leaving one who wishes to pursue these primary sources without the benefit of full references, a disappointing oversight for a scholar and an editor. Allen makes passing parenthetical reference to the work of Carlos Castaneda (who spent his fruitful years at her university), yet no works of his are cited in the bibliography. There are no references for the gifted writer, lawyer, and Native ethnographer Vine Deloria nor for other significant authors of Native affairs, such as the Tedlocks, Underhill, Neidhardt and Dee Brown, even stories about Kokopelli—all unexplainable omissions.

Allen’s description of brain studies is entirely without scientific validity, highly simplistic, and fundamentally inaccurate. Moreover, using advances in the neurosciences as a premise for disclosing the “irrational” in Native culture is a non sequitur, is unsound in the behavioral sciences (by equating studies in the neurosciences with psychiatry), and is a major disservice to brain research and Native investigators.

Learning another language is analogous to entering the expressive world of another culture or ethnic group. So when Pocahontas learned English, she entered the cultural orbit of English cultural expression. Similarly, when John Smith learned the Algonquin language, he partially entered the voice of the Native peoples. But implying that one can never learn how another thinks culturally is ethnocentric and defensive. To insinuate that being a Native person gives even a scholar the right to understand how all Natives think is presumptuous. Native peoples are as distinct from each other as are peoples living in Europe. Thus to believe that a Southwest Native can intuitively understand the beliefs of the Mattaponi, especially a Mattaponi living five hundred years ago, is as audacious as thinking that a present-day Pole could intuitively understand an Italian from the sixteenth century if both spoke Latin. However, if we accept that only a Native can understand another Native’s spiritual beliefs, then, excepting ethnicity, presumably any spiritual person ought to be able to understand any other spiritual person’s dimensions. That too would be nery.

The Mattaponi still exist on a small 125-acre reservation in Tidewater, Virginia, a preserve that dates from 1666, when Virginia was a Crown Colony. I have been privileged to see the original document granting these people this acreage hanging in the home of the chief when I had dinner with his family. The Chickahominy also reside in central Tidewater, near Jamestown, but have no state reservation. Professor Allen never states that she interviewed any Mattaponi or Chickahominy for evidence and documentation as a way of gaining validation for her assumptions about East Coast Natives or their beliefs. Her intuitive insights are intriguing but cannot stand as research since there is no way to authenticate her assumptions. Asking that we take the word of a scholar without corresponding evidence, whether in a courtroom or a publication, is tantamount to having us believe that it is possible to have personal revelations about what is true. Evidence is a method for preserving objectivity. Intuition is the stuff of religion and poetry.

We would not know Pocahontas at all had it not been for the English intrusion, but this book adds an imaginative and appealing interpretation to her life. The loss is that she died unfulfilled, a young woman in the bloom of life whose ultimate legacy is that her genes are still circulating in the American population.

Donald K. Sharpes
Arizona State University

Qulirat Qanemcit-Llu Kinguvarcimalriit. Stories for Future Generations: The Oratory of Yup'ik Eskimo Elder Paul John. By Paul John. Translated by Sophie Shield. Edited by Ann Fienup-Riordan. Bethel, AK: Calista Elders Council in association with the University of Washington Press, 2004. 856 pages. \$35.00 paper.

In the short space of ten days in 1977, Yup'ik elder Paul John entered the new Nelson Island High School and shared with the students a corpus of Yup'ik lore that he thought would help them as they entered adulthood. His stories are a combination of "traditional" legends from a distant past and more recent accounts that took place within the memory of the elders. This book is a compilation of those stories, written in the order he presented them, translated by Sophie Shield and edited by Ann Fienup-Riordan. Transcription is in Yup'ik and English.

The amount of effort and care that went into this work is immense. While Sophie Shield did the translations, translation is not an easy one-language-to-another process; it is an art, and the effort to capture the meaning of the speaker demands the efforts of several bilingual speakers. In this case the project benefited from the assistance of Marie Meade, Elsie Mather, and Alice Rearden. Throughout the manuscript Ann Fienup-Riordan's linguistic sensitivity to nuance in cultural meanings is evident in the extensive footnotes that accompany the text.