LIGHT ON THE PATH

The Anthropology and History of the Southeastern Indians

Edited by
THOMAS J. PLUCKHAHN
and ROBBIE ETHRIDGE

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS
Tuscaloosa

9 / Bridging Prehistory and History in the Southeast

Evaluating the Utility of the Acculturation Concept

John E. Worth

As countless researchers will attest, forging an effective and seamless link between prehistory and history in the southeastern United States is a daunting task. Bridging this gap is made all the more difficult by significant discontinuities and transformations occasioned by the trauma of the early European colonial era, much of which occurred beyond the realm of observation by European chroniclers. The creation of a truly complete social history of the southeastern Indians requires that scholars traverse this chasm using all the tools at their disposal, including archaeology, ethnohistory, and oral history. Nevertheless, given the nature of this transitional phase, researchers are obligated to rely heavily upon archaeological data in their attempts to reconstruct both the specific events and the broader patterns and processes of the colonial era in the deep frontier and, more particularly, their impact upon the indigenous societies that existed there at the moment of first contact.

The nature of the archaeological record has, of course, strongly influenced our methodological strategies, and one area in which this is clearly seen is in the emphasis traditionally given to the concept of acculturation in archaeological research relating to the impact of the European colonial era on southeastern Indians (e.g., Brain 1979; Brown 1979; Foster 1960; Quimby and Spoehr 1951; Wauchope 1956; White 1975). Archaeologists have most direct access to material goods and other physical traces of daily life, hence the easiest and most obvious measure of culture change during the colonial era is to be found in the transmission of new technology and other visible cultural traits from one culture to another. Though originally conceived more in terms

of "donor" and "recipient" cultures, namely from European to Indian, subsequent elaborations of the acculturation concept have acknowledged the bidirectional nature of such transmission, commonly denoted "transculturation."

Even as the past 30 years have clearly witnessed what would undoubtedly be classified as a paradigm shift in terms of the methodological and theoretical approaches of scholars studying the era of initial European contact in the southeastern United States, the concept of acculturation still seems to dominate the practical implementation of most archaeological and anthropological studies in this field. While anthropologists and historians around the world have since ventured far beyond the simple acculturation model, exploring a wide range of theoretical and methodological constructs to explain the transformations of the colonial era (e.g., the "middle ground" concept elaborated by White 1991), for many Southeastern researchers the concept of acculturation seems to have become accepted and internalized to such an extent that its importance or methodological utility is rarely even questioned. Even when "modernized" as transculturation or expanded beyond tools and technology to include subsistence strategies, architecture, and even political or religious transformation, the basic concept of acculturation—the lateral transmission of preexisting culture traits between interacting societies—still appears to dominate the thinking of many researchers in the Southeast.

Though initially trained within this milieu, I have gradually come to realize over the course of my own research that the concept of acculturation has only limited utility for understanding the transformations of the colonial era and that in many ways it is only a sideshow to the real action. The genesis of this chapter was a 2001 symposium honoring my former professor, mentor, and present colleague Charles Hudson for which I finally took the opportunity to explore a subject that has been troubling me for many years. When I first met him in the mid-1980s, much of Hudson's research was still focused on the route of the Hernando de Soto expedition and, more important, on the advances that had only recently been made in reconstructing the social geography of the sixteenth-century Southeast (see Hudson 1997b for the culmination of this research). This, in turn, had permitted new insights into the massive transformation that occurred between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, between prehistory and history (e.g., Hudson and Tesser 1994). Many of Hudson's students, myself included, ultimately ventured bravely forth into what he then called "the great black hole" of Southern history (Hudson 1987a, 1987b), attempting to chronicle and interpret the trau-

matic changes experienced by a multiplicity of indigenous societies across the Southeast, ranging from extinction to reinvention and including the well-known phenomenon of acculturation (e.g., see Smith 1987).

It was during this time that I had the pleasure of being enrolled as a graduate student in Hudson's ethnohistory class at the University of Georgia. One of several things I find most memorable about that class, apart from the fact that I was assigned the unenviable task of reading Fernand Braudel's entire two-volume masterpiece on the Mediterranean world of the sixteenth century (Braudel 1972), was our professor's offhand comment one day that he felt that the acculturation studies of the 1940s and 1950s "rarely contributed to knowledge in significant ways." Although I admit I was somewhat startled and perplexed at first, this comment ultimately became a seed that I stored away in my memory for later germination. Since that time, I have been particularly interested in the concept of acculturation in general and how it has been applied in the archaeological record. Nevertheless, perhaps in part because of this ethnohistory class but also as a result of my own subsequent experience as a professional archaeologist and ethnohistorian, something has always bothered me about acculturation studies. I have never quite been satisfied by studies equating degrees of cultural change during the European colonial era in the Southeast to the relative quantity and degree of innovations seen in the observed material culture of aboriginal groups. Something about it seemed too simplistic, too easy an answer to such a complex subject as culture change in the colonial Southeast.

It was only after more than a decade of original research into the early European colonial era, and especially after reworking a long dissertation into an even longer two-volume book, that I began to develop an inkling of a reason for why I felt uneasy about acculturation studies. On the basis of an exhaustive review of ethnohistorical and archaeological data regarding aboriginal culture change among the Timucuan Indians in Spanish Florida (Worth 1998a, 1998b), I was forced to conclude that nearly every example of truly significant culture change I could identify had almost nothing to do with the direct transmission of cultural traits from the dominant "donor" culture to the subordinate "recipient" culture. Furthermore, even when it was clearly possible to demonstrate the presence and use of specific elements of European material culture in aboriginal Timucuan contexts (e.g., Weisman 1992), I found this information to be of almost no value to me with regard to the truly significant and far more sweeping cultural changes that were going on at the same time. The phenomenon commonly defined as "acculturation" was but a shadowy reflection of something much more significant and interesting.

Ultimately, I began to see that culture change within the context of European contact and colonialism had far less to do with the transmission and assimilation of cultural traits from Europeans to Indians than it did with the internally generated responses of aboriginal cultures to much broader changes in the social, economic, and even natural environment in which they found themselves after contact. This realization was more than simply repeating the mantra that southeastern Indians were not merely passive recipients of European culture but rather took an active role in their own interactions with outsiders. Any archaeologist worth his or her salt already knows this well. Nor was it simply a recognition that the transmission of cultural traits was not unidirectional but rather flowed both to and fro between Europeans and Indians, which is commonly referred to as transculturation. This, too, is widely known and accepted.

No, my critique of acculturation studies actually ran somewhat deeper. What finally clinched the argument in my mind was the search for an answer to a question that, once again, had been posed to me by Charles Hudson a full decade after that first ethnohistory class. As a part of the Porter Fortune symposium organized in 1998 by Robbie Ethridge and Charles Hudson at the University of Mississippi, Charlie framed the paper he wanted me to develop as the following question: why were there hereditary matrilineal chiefs still present in the mission system after more than a century of interaction with Europeans? In other words, what was it about the Spanish mission system that seemed to lend such durability to the ancient chiefly social system that fell apart so rapidly elsewhere? As I now perceive Charlie's original question, I could also reframe it as follows: why didn't the mission Indians become more fully acculturated despite such regular and lengthy immersion in the Spanish mission system?

Of critical importance here, the answer to this question bears directly on the usefulness of acculturation models to predict the direction and rate of social change in culture contact situations, especially between a dominant European colonial society and the many peripheral societies along its frontier. While I did not explore this connection in my Porter Fortune paper (Worth 2002b), what I have come to realize is that colonial acculturation studies are commonly founded upon a somewhat flawed presupposition, namely, that the greater the intensity and duration of interaction between dominant and subordinate cultures, the greater the amount of cultural change that results.

Furthermore, even though archaeologists recognize that cultural change is normally bidirectional, there is also a general presupposition that the direction of culture change is predominantly lateral, that is to say *between* societies. Each society begins to resemble the other, though the direction of such changes is heavily weighted in favor of transmission from dominant to subordinate cultures. In retrospect, I now believe that *both* these notions are somewhat misguided and focus on only secondary epiphenomena that have little to do with more fundamental transformations arising from different sources.

Let us briefly examine the question posed by Hudson above. From a solely archaeological standpoint, a comparison between contemporaneous late seventeenth-century mission sites in Spanish Florida and aboriginal village sites in the deep colonial frontier produces ample fodder for acculturation studies as commonly implemented in the Southeast. As points of reference for this broader comparison, we could use Spanish mission sites in Florida like Santa Catalina, Santa María, and San Luís and Creek Indian sites in Georgia like Macon Plateau and Tarver (McEwan 1992, 2000; Mason 1963a; Pluckhahn 1997; Pluckhahn and Braley 1999; Saunders 1993; Thomas 1993). From this perspective, the answer to the question posed above might seem simple: by definition, mission Indians appear to have been more acculturated in the material realm than frontier Indians. Excavations on mission sites normally produce a far greater diversity of European objects than are found on frontier sites, including Spanish storage and table ceramics and glassware, metal tools and hardware, horse tack, jewelry, and many other items. European fruits and grains are commonly found, as are bones of domestic animals such as cows and pigs. Mission Indians even made aboriginal ceramics in European forms, commonly called colono-ware. And there are, of course, many square-post, rectangular structures built with nails in mission villages. In contrast to these mission sites, however, frontier sites typically produce only a limited range of trade goods, including glass beads, broken rum bottles, iron tools, sheet metal and wire ornaments, and munitions and gun parts. Even when Spanish ceramics or other exotic items occur, they have sometimes been interpreted as booty from slave raids on Spanish missions. Clearly, mission Indians were living in the presence of a significant quantity and diversity of items of European material culture, and this is indeed reflected in the archaeological record. By traditional definitions, mission Indians would seem to have been more acculturated than frontier Indians.

But let's reexamine that very same evidence in a different light and expand on it using documentary evidence. Artifact distribution studies and

ethnohistorical information suggest that many of the European objects found in missions were not, in fact, normally used or discarded by mission Indians but rather by resident friars, soldiers, and passing Spanish visitors. Spanish majolica and olive jar sherds, for example, seem likely to have been little used by mission Indians, who had little need for exotic European wares. Aboriginal ceramic manufacture continued unabated throughout the mission period, and even the exotic colono-ware vessels seem to have been made specifically for use by Europeans, not Indians. Spanish missionaries, soldiers, and citizenry demanded European tableware, and this demand, when coupled with limited supply in the mission system, produced a market for indigenous copies that we now call colono-ware (e.g., Hann 1988:245; Saunders 2000:34; Worth 1995:125, 1998a:169–170). Even unaltered aboriginal ceramic vessels were used by Spanish households in St. Augustine, occasionally finding their way into mention in wills and other estate papers, suggesting that aboriginal production was so robust as to provide for frequent shortfalls in the availability of Spanish wares (e.g., Deagan 1993). Clearly, mission Indians preferred and used their own pottery even in this context of apparent "acculturation."

Even beyond the realm of ceramics, many other objects commonly thought to reflect the degree of "acculturation" among mission Indians were simply replacements or enhancements of preexisting aboriginal forms, necessitating only minor adaptations in daily life. Spanish hoes and axes and other iron tools were incorporated into a preexisting though intensified aboriginal farming economy; glass beads and other items of jewelry replaced shell or stone equivalents; and European fruits and occasional grains were simply incorporated into an already diverse aboriginal diet. Even the cow and pig remains found at mission sites were in many or most cases from animals grown on local Spanish ranches, using minimal Indian labor and Spanish supervision (Worth 1998a:199–203). And despite the presence of new European-style structures such as the church and convent, aboriginal architecture in both public and domestic realms seems to have been little changed from precolonial norms.

To be fair, it is true that mission Indians were for the most part practicing Catholics and in that way had clearly succumbed to European influences in the religious realm. And they were, of course, more or less fully assimilated into the overall political and economic structure of Spanish Florida. But in overall perspective, the missionized chiefdoms themselves actually changed internally only very little within the context of the mission system (Worth 2002b). Chiefs and headmen of ruling matrilineages still governed in secular

affairs. Their noble relatives still occupied hereditary positions as counselors. Local and regional chiefly councils still met and still contained seating ranked by genealogical nearness to the principal chief. Warriors still maintained their weapons as a formal militia and advanced in achieved rank by the number of enemies killed. Chiefs and other noble officials were still supported at public cost and received tribute in the form of goods and labor. Chiefly matrilineages still claimed title to ancestral lands and the resources they held. And mission chiefdoms still relied fundamentally upon surplus agricultural production on chiefly lands as a basis for political and economic power. The Spanish overlords were simply paramount chiefs who extracted their percentage above and beyond that of the local headmen. And, perhaps most surprising of all, the Spaniards supported and reinforced all these aboriginal structures willingly, because it was part and parcel of their own colonial success.

Now, let us contrast this situation with that of the more remote frontier groups such as the Creeks. For our purposes, the comparatively limited assemblage of trade goods commonly found on Creek sites is misleading, for these objects actually reflect far greater cultural change than might seem evident at first. Of course, the same arguments made above regarding cultural replacements might be made here as concerns the glass beads and metal jewelry, as well as some of the metal tools. And just like the mission Indians, the Creeks and other frontier groups maintained a strong aboriginal ceramic tradition well into the eighteenth and even nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the most important European objects from a culture-change perspective are the gun parts and munitions and the occasional Spanish object looted during slave raids. These items reflect early participation by the Creeks in the emerging realm of English commerce and, most particularly, in the Indian slave trade (see Gallay 2002). On the basis of ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence, it is becoming more and more evident that the expansion of English trade and the concurrent spread of firearms was one of the most significant factors in cultural transformation among the colonial southeastern Indians.

Specifically, I believe the introduction of firearms and the vast English market for Indian slaves led directly to rapid and fundamental societal transformation in the southeastern interior (see Worth 2002b:59–64). The origins of this widespread transformation can be traced to the year 1685, when English traders operating out of Charleston finally established commercial relations with the emergent Lower Creek polity on the lower Chattahoochee River. Prior to this time, an immigrant band of Erie Indians operating first out of Virginia and later out of Carolina maintained a stranglehold on the emerging

Indian slave trade (Bowne 2000a; Hahn 2000:60–70; Worth 1995:15–18, 26–27, 30–32, 35). After these Westo Indians were destroyed and replaced by the Savannah in the early 1680s, it was only a few years before the Creeks became principal agents in this trade, joined by fugitive Yamassees from the Florida missions (Hahn 2000:181–207; Worth 2000, 2002a). From 1685 until 1715 the Creeks and Yamassees dominated the slave trade, and it seems to have been this crucial period that witnessed the rise of a new social order in the deep frontier. In just one or two generations, these frontier groups were radically transformed from coalescent agricultural chiefdoms just on the verge of recovery after epidemic population collapse into highly mobile commercial slave-hunting tribes with only secondary reliance on agriculture. And with these economic changes came a devaluation of the ancient basis for hereditary chiefly power, namely land and labor, and the emergence of a new dualistic social order balancing ascribed and achieved status based on prowess in commercial hunting and warfare. The entire political economy of frontier groups was restructured within the context of a new globally interconnected market economy, all within the space of only a few decades and yet at a physical distance of more than 200 miles in some cases.

Given this background, my primary criticism of the concept of acculturation thus boils down to the following questions: how is it that distant frontier societies involved in long-distance trade with English colonists experienced far greater social change in a single generation than did other societies that were fully assimilated within the Spanish mission system for longer than a century? And why is it that the acculturation model would normally predict otherwise based solely on the archaeological record? Answers to these questions will undoubtedly require further investigation and thought, and even to elaborate on the questions themselves would occupy considerably more space than has been allotted in this volume. Nevertheless, I would like to at least make a preliminary effort to address a few of the difficulties I perceive with the acculturation concept as it is commonly implemented for the colonial Southeast.

First, acculturation studies generally do not explore the dimension of scale in their analyses. They tend to extrapolate principally from the individual and domestic sphere of life and focus less on the broader political and economic relationships within and between individual polities operating on the colonial landscape. While acculturative culture change within individual households and villages undoubtedly occurred, these changes in material culture occurred to a certain extent independently of higher-level changes in the broader social landscape within which each household and village functioned. In other

words, the degree to which individual Indian families absorbed European technology and aesthetics into their daily lives may have varied considerably over both time and space, but for analytical purposes, this variation may not provide archaeologists with an accurate measure of sometimes rapid or short-term alterations in the overarching political economy of individual societies, some of which were the origin of radical culture change during the colonial era.

Second, acculturation studies tend to explore the question of culture change from a "bottom-up" approach, as if material culture were the primary agent of culture change and not the other way around. They also tend to take a somewhat simplistic view of the numerous mechanisms by which European objects entered aboriginal material culture and of the political and economic context surrounding such exchange. This has caused archaeologists no end of consternation regarding the interpretation of trade-good assemblages and their relationship to acculturative culture change. Too often, archaeologists have simply presupposed that Indians were always voracious consumers of European goods and that the more goods they got, the more European their culture became. Recently, archaeologists have finally begun asking the question of why Indians became consumers and how their consumption changed through time (e.g., Knight 1985:169–183), although I personally believe they should be focusing less on changes in consumption and more on changes in production with respect to the consequences of English commerce. It was, after all, a radical shift in production on a local scale in response to external demand that seems to have triggered broader social changes in the political economy of frontier groups, as discussed above. The increasing presence of English trade goods is in many ways simply a by-product of that more fundamental shift. In focusing so heavily on acculturation in the material realm, archaeologists may be putting the cart before the horse.

Finally, and most important, the acculturation model not only fails to predict both the rate and the direction of culture change within culture contact situations but it also overlooks major changes of strictly internal aboriginal origin, which in many cases were far more profound. How could the acculturation model have predicted the almost wholesale replacement of indigenous Mocama and Timucua ceramic traditions by those of their neighbors and previous enemies among the Guale and Apalachee, all during a period of perhaps less than half a century (Worth 1997)? And how could it have predicted the transformation of agricultural chiefdoms based on the chiefly management of land and labor into more egalitarian tribal confederacies subsisting

as primary producers in the English slave and deerskin trade? Or the failure of similar societies to make that same transformation within the colonial system of Spanish Florida? If our goal as anthropologists is to develop theoretical models that accurately represent the processes of culture change in a variety of situations, then I would argue that the concept of acculturation must be employed far more critically and with a greater degree of explicit methodological sophistication than is normally the case.

In conclusion, I should emphasize that my intent is by no means to uniformly blast acculturation studies as insignificant or fruitless or to set up the now moribund concept of acculturation as a straw man. Past and future archaeological studies that measure acculturation as traditionally defined are unquestionably informative and useful and clearly have a place within the scholarly study of the early European colonial era in the Southeast. My primary criticism of acculturation studies is that they generally focus on one relatively minor and secondary element of the colonial experience—intersocietal transmission of cultural traits in the material realm—as if it were the principal machine driving culture change in the colonial era. I suggest instead that we should rethink the overall context and origin of culture change during the colonial era, as many others have done in other contexts for different parts of the world. Specifically, we should not focus our attention exclusively on lateral transmission of preexisting culture traits between societies in contact, but rather we should give greater attention to internally generated changes resulting independently from alterations in the broader political and economic landscape within which these societies operated.

And, as Charles Hudson argued throughout his long career, these kinds of sweeping but intricate changes are perhaps best analyzed and understood within the context of what the French Annales school of social history first called *histoire totale,* distinguishing between the various scales of historical time that Fernand Braudel referred to as geographical, social, and individual levels (Braudel 1972:20–22, 1980; Hudson 1985a). Within this context, I believe that the key to understanding the specifics and generalities of social transformation among southeastern Indians during the European colonial era ultimately lies in the assimilation of a previously autonomous set of provincial chiefdoms into a truly global sociopolitical and economic system, a watershed change that had repercussions well beyond Braudel's mid-level *conjonctures,* affecting even the *longue durée* of long-term structural patterns. These newly peripheralized societies were suddenly thrust onto a reformulated social landscape, one driven simultaneously by the emerging capitalistic marketplace of

England and the quasi-feudal agrarian system of Spain. And in that new landscape, the lateral diffusion of cultural traits from European to Indian clearly took a back seat to the far-reaching internal reformulation of many aboriginal societies to meet new demands and circumstances. Chiefdoms scrambled to adapt themselves to new demographic, economic, political, and even natural realities, and it was these top-down adjustments that dominated the scene for much of the colonial era. If acculturative change occurred, it was only a ripple in a rising tide in many cases. Acculturation is certainly worth studying, but only as part of a much broader picture. Only when one or more scholars undertake to rewrite Braudel's Mediterranean masterpiece for the colonial Southeast will we truly be able to make significant progress toward bridging the chasm between prehistory and history for the southeastern Indians.