

Ethnohistory Field School Report

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The Chief of Chilliwack:

Ambition, Religion, and Coercion in the Life of Captain John Swalis

Dallas Joshua Posavad

University of Saskatchewan

The Ethnohistory Field School is a collaboration of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre and the History Departments of the University of Victoria and University of Saskatchewan.



Many Soowahlie band members held up Captain John Swalis (or Slipset; 1810-1908) as a great hereditary chief of all the Aboriginal people of the Central Fraser River Valley and one of the most important figures in Stó:lō and, more specifically, Ts'elxweyeqw history. He and his two brothers are credited with starting the families that would eventually branch out to create the three largest modern families of Soowahlie, making Captain John a founding member of the reserve. New archival research suggests that rather than being a straightforward defender of his people's rights, he was an enigmatic figure who was at times complicit in the colonial plot to reduce the reserves allocated to them by surveyor William McColl in 1864 under the authority of Gov. James Douglas. With such a long tradition of remembering Captain John as a dedicated leader, the thought of him signing away the vast majority of Soowahlie's 4000-acre Douglas reserve is an uncomfortable revelation. One rationalization for this is that Captain John was motivated concurrently by a spiritual crisis brought on by his introduction to alcohol and Christian certain missionaries who conflated the Gospel message with Eurocentric notions of "civility" and "progress." Alternatively, he made have been persuaded to cede the land due to the threats of violence coming from the settler population who had a lot to gain by the reduction. If Captain John did forfeit the Douglas reserve, it was only thanks to either the systematic mental and spiritual abuse that is endemic of colonial relationships in British Columbia.

Captain John's contribution to the development of Soowahlie Reserve is still remembered today. The church he is largely responsible for attracting to Soowahlie under the guidance of Rev. Crosby continued to serve as the community meeting space until it burned down in 1961. (The adjacent river shores provided a convenient space for children and adolescents to swim

after Sunday service or social gatherings.¹) His reputation as a community developer also merits mention, which he partially earned by helping to construct the original Vedder Bridge with help from his followers in 1891.² Captain John's legendary business savvy and devotion to his adopted faith, Methodism, round out his modern legacy. The *History of Soowahlie: Echoes of the Past*, written by band member Tara Kelly in 2005 to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Soowahlie Band Administration, provides a glance into recent Soowahlie conceptualizations of Captain John. He left behind "a legend of a great leader, a hard worker and dedicated Christian."³ Captain John is identified as hereditary chief and, aside from befriending Methodist settlers, there was no mention of his involvement in Euro-American/colonial society. However, there is another narrative on Captain John that has come to light in recent years.

In late 2012, Dr. Keith Carlson shared research discoveries during a presentation on the Douglas Reserve reductions to the Soowahlie Band.⁴ It appears that the infamous truncation in 1868 of Soowahlie from 4000 acres to just 600 was done with the consent of acting chief, Captain John.⁵ These new revelations about this famous community figure surprised many in attendance, especially since there are such strong family connections to him on the reserve. Some were also distressed that it had the potential of damaging the reserve's ongoing court claim against the provincial government since it appears that it was done under the authority of the acting chief instead of "without the consent of the Indian Band," as Tara Kelly and others

¹ Latasia Commodore and Marcella Commodore, interviews by Anne Janhunen, Sabina Trimble and Dallas Posavad, Soowahlie Band Office, 29 May 2013.

² Captain John, "The Story of the conversion and subsequent experiences of Captain John as narrated by himself," trans. from Chinook by Rev. W.H. Barraclough (Sardis Epworth League, 30 March 1898); Tara Kelly, in her booklet *History of Soowahlie* dates the original Vedder Bridge construction at 1878. I can find no other corroborating evidence to support this date, though she may be correct for reasons I am unaware of.

³ Tara Kelly, *History of Soowahlie: Echoes of the Past*, prepared for the 35th Anniversary for the Soowahlie Band Administration (2005), 10.

⁴ Marcella Commodore, interviewed by Dallas Posavad, Soowahlie Band Office, 31 May 2013.

⁵ Some sources say 690 acres. The map this is taken from is difficult to make out. In any case, the reserve was increase to its modern size (1140 acres) following Confederation in 1871.

believed prior to 2012.⁶ Captain John's legitimacy as a community leader was also put under scrutiny since it appeared that he was simply appointed by the colonial government to the office of Chief of Soowahlie rather than the democratically elected anti-reduction Catholic contender candidate who claimed hereditary status.⁷

The new discoveries caused some uneasiness. The Commodore family, who are descendants of Captain John's daughter and her husband known simply as "Commodore," were particularly affected. Former chief Larry Commodore remembers growing up thinking of Captain John as a hereditary leader and, as a relation, felt distinguished for this hereditary connection. Now, on the other hand, Captain John's hereditary title is in question and some consider his actions a betrayal.⁸ Marcella Commodore and former Chief Otis Jasper are curious to better understand the motivation behind Captain John's actions or the coercive tactics behind the apparent consent.⁹

Much of this controversy relates to his relationship with the infamous racist and colonial bureaucrat Joseph Trutch. Trutch would become Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works of the Colony and later Lt. Gov. of the Province of British Columbia. Before holding these positions, however, he staked his financial future on his ability to fulfil his contract to build the Alexandra Suspension Bridge near Spuzzum. According to oral history provided to Dr. Keith Carlson by the late Soowahlie band member Andy Commodore, when Trutch's engineers could not transport the cables necessary for construction due to their bulky dimensions and the narrowness of the

⁶ Kelly, 5.

⁷ Keith Thor Carlson, *Power of Place, The Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 194-200.

⁸ Larry Commodore, interview by Anne Janhunnen and Dallas Posavad, Soowahlie Band Office, 29 May 2013.

⁹ Otis Jasper, interview by Anne Janhunnen, Sabina Trimble and Dallas Posavad, interviewee's residence, 22 May 2013; Marcella Commodore, 31 May 2013.

road his financial investment was in serious jeopardy—that is, until Captain John got his family and followers together and literally took the cables off the spool, hoisted them onto their shoulders, and walked them to the construction site, guiding them along the trail as they went.¹⁰ This made the construction of the Alexandra Bridge in 1863 possible, which in turn facilitated the entry of thousands of gold prospectors, not to mention the more lucrative businesses that followed them. As a private investor, Trutch controlled unavoidable tolls, making himself and Captain John very wealthy.¹¹ This profitable partnership did not end there, however.

The interrelated success of Trutch and Captain John linked their fates as they called upon one another for favours in times of need. When Trutch needed someone with authority to consent to the Douglas reserve reductions that were essential to his platform as a politician, Captain John was the obvious choice for the case of Soowahlie. And when Captain John failed to get elected by Soowahlie as chief (gaining only 5 of 24 votes), Trutch heeded the threats of 28 protesting white settlers who had already devoted time and resources to establishing their agricultural pretensions within the Soowahlie's Douglas reserve. The government needed Captain John to serve as chief to give an aura of legitimacy to the reduction.¹²

Colonial authorities proved that they were more mindful of settler complaints and threats than democratic practices in Soowahlie. During this first election west of the Rocky Mountains, the people of Soowahlie made it clear that they did not consent to the reductions or Captain John's authority to speak for the band. However, given the rate at which other reserves were being decreased under Trutch it seems difficult to believe that Soowahlie would have escaped unscathed from these ruthless colonial policies. As the Union of BC Indian Chiefs recognizes,

¹⁰ Carlson, *The Power of Place*, 198-199.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹² *Ibid.*, 198; See also the map with Captain John labelled as "Chief" in the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre's map room or pictured on page 196 of *The Power of Place* by Carlson.

"many ... methods [of reduction] haven been arbitrary, unfair, and against the wishes of the Bands concerned."¹³ This seems to be the case regardless of the apparent "consent" to the reduction. Even if Captain John did consent to the truncation, his establishment as chief was only made possible with the undemocratic intervention of colonial authorities and threats of violence from white encroachers on Soowahlie land. Given that Captain John was caught up in a much larger colonial conspiracy to reduce reserve lands in British Columbia, it is difficult to know how the rationalization of the reductions were made to Captain John. As cases from all over North America demonstrate, "great frauds and abuses" occurred while acquiring "consent" from "chiefs" for land transfers.¹⁴ It is entirely possible that, given he did not speak English and communicated with Euro-American society principally through the limited pidgin language Chinook, there is ample room for speculations that frauds and abuses occurred.

The problem of translation between Euro-American land-seekers and Aboriginal ambassadors is well documented, both today and in the Colonial Era; the Royal Proclamation is but one (if weighty) proof of this. I say "ambassadors" as an intentionally vague term, as these land speculators were not always dealing with chiefs or community leaders with authority to consent to land transfers. Furthermore, the idea of trading land to another group was alien to many Aboriginal nations of North America (and elsewhere). European conceptions of land ownership came from Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke. In sum, if the land was considered unused (which meant not being farmed and occupied year-round) it was seen as

¹³ Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, *The Land We Lost: A History of Cut-Off Lands and Land Losses from Indian Reserves in British Columbia* (1974), 2.

¹⁴ The quoted piece is taken from the Royal Proclamation of 1763, drafted by King George III after the 7 Years' War. In order to help dispel the extreme dissatisfaction of Aboriginal groups (especially in the Ohio and Illinois countries), strict measure were outlined for proper transfer of land titles between white and Aboriginal groups. After the United States won its independence from Britain, they were no longer bound by these stipulations, unlike their Canadian counterparts. Furthermore, these stipulations were not interpreted to apply to the lands west of the Rocky Mountains (i.e., British Columbia). I bring this up to show the recognition, from the highest authority of the colonial regime (none other than the King himself), that scandalous practices of land transfer were widespread.

viable land for European settlement. Given that this conceptualization of land ownership was a primarily European phenomenon, it is unclear whether or not Captain John would have understood exactly what he was signing away, and ensuring that he understood what was being bartered for would likely not have been the principal concern for BC authorities, who were not bound by the Royal Proclamation, which protected Aboriginal groups from such scandalous negotiations. To gain a clearer look into the context of the land transfer, it is best to try to understand Captain John's thought process, however difficult that may be.

With regard to archival documents, much of what is known about Captain John stems from the transcript of his talk in Chinook at a meeting in 1898 of the Sardis Epworth League, a Methodist organization created by early white settlers in the area. As it was recorded, from humble beginnings and with unyielding dedication to his dream of becoming a great chief, he lived as frugally as possible in order to store up enough material wealth to host a great potlatch. Distributing material goods was a sign of wealth and power in Ts'elxweyeqw and wider Stó:lō societies, and was the principal means by which one could attain prestige and influence. It was the principal mechanism of social mobility. Eventually he was able to invite "all the Indians of his and other tribes" to witness the great occasion and hosted a very successful potlatch, after which he became a prominent member of the Aboriginal community of the Lower Fraser River Valley.¹⁵ His fame in the Coast Salish world grew as he was also learning how to best exploit the new economic opportunities brought by the incoming settlers and travellers.¹⁶ Captain John's ambition pushed him to learn how to rise to the top in both Aboriginal and Euro-American worlds.

¹⁵ Kelly, 8.

¹⁶ Captain John, "The Story of the conversion and subsequent experiences of Captain John as narrated by himself," trans. from Chinook by Rev. W.H. Barraclough (Sardis Epworth League, 30 March 1898).

According to the Epworth League transcript, Captain John earned money ferrying gold-prospecting immigrants across the Fraser River at Yale, at first refusing to accept gold or silver as payment. He considered these precious metals of little value, and instead “much preferr[ed] an old hat or shirt to the white mans [sic] coin.”¹⁷ But by request of his wife, Sally Ann Swolose, he reluctantly began to accept this new currency payment and he started to accumulate wealth in the emerging capitalist economy in addition to his prominence in the Ts’elxweyeqw sphere. His ferry service from the Vedder River to Cultus Lake and across to Vedder Crossing, as well as his contribution to the construction of the original Vedder Bridge in 1891, are just some examples of his ability to recognize lucrative opportunities to be exploited by foreign incursions into British Columbia.¹⁸

But while Captain John was making his way to the top of the Ts’elxweyeqw social ladder and living up to his epithet *Swalis* or “getting rich” (eventually earning considerably more than even Gov. James Douglas), he was also struggling with an addiction to alcohol that emerged after a traveller introduced him to the bane of many Aboriginal communities during this time: fire water.¹⁹ Captain John’s fall into alcoholism sparked a spiritual crisis within him for salvation, in multiple senses of the word. The distress of such a powerful indigenous leader drew the attention of the Christian missionaries in the area, who competed for the minds and hearts of the Aboriginal groups. Despite his efforts, the Catholic priest failed to persuade Captain John, who ultimately chose Methodism thanks in no small part to the urging of early Methodist settlers like A.C. Wells of Edenbank Farms and Rev. Crosby, and despite his prior association with

¹⁷ Captain John.

¹⁸ Kelly, 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., 8-9.

Catholicism “like all the other Indians in the valley.”²⁰ After his conversion experience at a Methodist camp meeting in Nanaimo, Captain John embraced Methodism and the conviction that “in order to be a Christian he must give up all his old heathen customs and all his own bad habits”²¹ In short, Christianity and Western conceptions of civility were a package deal in the minds of many Euro-Americans, who went to great lengths to ensure that Aboriginal groups adopted this opinion as well. It is important to note that many Aboriginal Christians quite rightly separated the universal teachings of Christianity from the damaging colonial beliefs. But, as far as the Epworth document says, Captain John accepted Rev. Crosby’s somewhat colonizing version of Methodism.

How Rev. Barraclough translated the document deserves consideration. Captain John related his story to a reverend of the Methodist church coming from his own cultural background. John Lutz suggests the way Europeans conceptualized British Columbia First Nations societies at contact (and vice versa) was largely a function of their collective consciousness.²² Captain John also related his conversion experience in Chinook, a pidgin language of 700 words, which suggests that body language and inflection would also need interpretation due to the limited vocabulary. Misunderstandings between Aboriginal and Euro-American have occurred throughout the Americas, and John Lutz explores this phenomenon in the context of BC in *Makúk*. This is to say that how Captain John intended his story to be interpreted may not have crossed the cultural barrier perfectly. His story definitely fits the mould

²⁰ Captain John.

²¹ Ibid.

²² John Lutz, John Lutz, “Myth Understandings; or First Contact, Over and Over Again,” in *Myth and Memory: Stories of Indigenous-European Contact*, ed. John Lutz (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 2.

of many others about whom Euro-Americans have written ethnographic²³ texts during the early Colonial Era, and is replete with Christian tropes and themes that are particularly prevalent in the writings of evangelical denominations like Methodism. Although, Captain John had been a Christian for decades by that point and so it possible that they understood each other fairly well. However, given that Captain John may not have spoken English (hence his retelling in Chinook), he would have had to be taught about what it meant to be Christian from the missionaries—like Rev. Crosby, who espoused a revitalized evangelical Methodism and believed that it was essential that Aboriginal people reform their societies to resemble, as closely as possible, Western ways.²⁴

The context in which Captain John lived was a traumatic time, a factor that needs to be considered as well. The population of Aboriginal people was decreasing at an alarming rate, while the white settlers were multiplying exponentially. In 1835, the Aboriginal population of BC was approximately 70,000; by 1901 that number had dropped to 25,488. During that same time period, the number of non-Natives went from a negligible 350 to 153, 169. Put another way, within the span of 66 years, Aboriginal people went from composing 99.9% of the total population of British Columbia to 14.3%.²⁵ This all took place within the lifespan of Captain John (1810-1908). Although he would not have had these statistics, the changing society around him would have made the same conclusion abundantly clear: a new world order was taking place right before his very eyes. How was one to survive under such grim circumstances? Also, why

²³ Pratt identifies ethnographic texts in comparison with autoethnographic texts (those written by Aboriginal people about themselves), and autochthonous texts (Aboriginal representations of themselves using pre-Contact devices).

²⁴ Clarence R. Bolt, "CROSBY, THOMAS," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed October 9, 2013, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/crosby_thomas_14E.html.

²⁵ Lutz, *Makik*, 166.

was this happening? It is not absurd to think that Captain John felt that close cooperation with white society was paramount to Soowahlie's very survival.

Captain John's problem of interpreting destruction is a recurrent theme in Native-Newcomer history. For comparison's sake, the Huron (Wendat) of the 17th-century in the Great Lakes region, when their Iroquois enemies and Europeans were thriving while smallpox was destroying their society, debated the role of Catholicism that missionaries in New France promoted; some thought the French missionaries were the reasons Europeans did not seem to be affected as harshly from disease, while others considered their bizarre practices as evil and the cause of the calamities themselves. In short, there were disagreements about how to interpret the disease and, therefore, how best to remedy the situation. Some advocated for refusal of all that came with the European culture, while other saw in them the cure.

Furthermore, other historic First Nations figures have adopted cooperative politics, such as Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) of the Mississaugas (Ojibwa),²⁶ Shingwauk of the Anishinabe,²⁷ and the Cree missionary Charles Pratt as the best option to promote a healthy society. For example, with good intentions, Chief Shingwauk pushed hard for the establishment of schools for his people that would prepare them to compete in the Canadian society; he could not have known that residential schooling would be so essential to the assimilative policies of the Canadian government, which remains one of the darkest stains on Canada's reputation even today. Something similar may be true of Captain John's rationalization behind his cooperation with Euro-American policies.

²⁶ Peter Jones would have identified himself as Anishinabe or Ojibwa, though Europeans considered him to be a "Mississauga" Indian, a name that they would not have used for themselves. The Ojibwa were one of the constituent nations of the Anishinabe Confederacy. Cf. Donald Smith, *Sacred Feathers: The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 17.

²⁷ For more information on Shingwauk, I suggest J.R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision*.

Captain John's relationship with the battling Catholic and Methodist missionaries warrants further investigation as well. Both sides, it seems, desperately wanted to win Captain John to their faith, possibly because it was thought that his great influence would facilitate the spread of their particular form of Christianity to those under his influence. Both the Protestants and Catholics tried to win favour by assuring the potential convert of the eternal damnation of those who remained non-Christian or chose the wrong sect of the Christian faith.²⁸

The missionaries exploited the spiritual crisis in Captain John at the perfect time. Desperate to cleanse himself of alcoholism, and perhaps some anxiety about the afterlife, Captain John fell into a mental hell in its own right: "These contrary forces [Methodist and Catholic missionaries] caused Capt. John a great deal of trouble, and he felt very much worried for a long long time. He wanted to do what was right but halted as to which was the right thing to do and which the wrong."²⁹ Finally, after much deliberation, he converted to Methodism camp in Nanaimo when called by Rev. Crosby to speak for Christ: "He didn't know what to say. He listened to the exhortations and explanations of Rev. Crosby and finally realized that in order to be a Christian he must give up all his old heathen customs and all his own bad habits, and everything else that was bad, and trust in God to save his from his sins, and try to live every day just as Jesus wanted him to live."³⁰ It's conceivable that that Captain John was influenced by the Crosby's cultural conviction of the importance of Western lifestyles.

The interpretive theory of Walter D. Mignolo's work may be of use at this point.³¹ He is interested in hermeneutics—that is, the method of interpretation. This is not the hermeneutic in the traditional sense of the term (to interpret a sacred text), but rather relates to how we interpret

²⁸ Carlson, *Power of Place*, ch. 7; see especially the banner (p. 193) created by a Protestant depicting various events of human history, culminating with the pope falling headlong into the fire of hell.

²⁹ Captain John, 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 6.

³¹ "Pluri" refers to multiple and "topic" refers to *topoi* or "spaces"

the world around us—philosophically, emotionally, mentally and in any other way. In this light, a hermeneutic determines a worldview that colours how we see the world. For comparison, a monotopic hermeneutic was utilized by the many in Euro-American societies of the 19th century, that is, they interpreted everything through the lenses of their own Western tradition; they generally did not interpret these realities diatopically, which would entail the European considerations as well as understanding how Aboriginal groups developed their own rationalizations of the world (their philosophies, explanations, conceptions of land use). As Raimundo Panikkar explains:

Diatopical hermeneutics is the required method of interpretation when the distance to overcome, needed for any understanding, is not just a distance within a single culture . . . , or a temporal one . . . , but rather the distance between two (or more) cultures, which have independently developed in different spaces (topoi) their own methods of philosophizing and ways of reaching intelligibility along with their proper categories.³²

Instead, they held to a monotopic hermeneutic, which “served to maintain the universality of European culture at the same time that it justified the tendency of its members to perceive themselves as the reference point to evaluate all other cultures.”³³ Mignolo takes Panikkar’s hermeneutic to its logical conclusion by expanding it to include the innumerable social positions that may inform one’s hermeneutic. Captain John was raised in an Aboriginal society; however, it is not as simple as this since one’s class within that society would affect how one perceives the world around them and, in turn, how one acts in the world.

As Dr. Keith Carlson explains in his chapter in *Myth and Memory*, Stó:lō societies were divided in two principal groups: *smela:lh* (“worthy people”) and *s'texem* (“worthless people”).

³² Raimundo Panikkar, quoted in Mignolo, 16.

³³ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, 18.

The main difference between the two was that the former knew their history³⁴ and the latter did not, which was a major obstacle to securing significant names, access to resources, and social prestige. Siyemchés has pointed out the importance of “knowing your history” in Stó:lō society and Carlson has concluded that “few things are more important than an individual’s reputation as a historical expert” in Stó:lō culture.³⁵ It was of paramount importance to be able to effectively convince others of inherited resource rights such as fishing spots, berry patches, spiritual and familial genealogies, and social protocols; this *sqwelqwel*,³⁶ in short, was how the Stó:lō kept track of the passage of wealth.³⁷ When elections were held for the chieftainship of Soowahlie, Catholic contenders claimed that Captain John was of low birth (*s'texem*), and earned his wealth through capitalistic enterprises rather than convincing oral history of his hereditary genealogy as a leader.

Captain John may not have known his history, or perhaps the contenders had better evidence, which was essential to recognition of status in Stó:lō society, and consequentially lost this “history war,” to use a term by John Lutz to describe the such disputes. Given the underwhelming outcome of the Soowahlie election for Captain John, it’s possible that other had convincing case for their hereditary status. The Catholic candidates also enjoyed the support of Catholic missionaries who sought to organize reserves based on already-established hereditary leaderships. He may have exploited the new opportunities brought by white settlers to break out

³⁴ Here, history refers to knowing one’s genealogy (normally up to 7 or 8 generations) as well as where one’s ancestral spirits come from.

³⁵ Carlson, “Reflections on Indigenous History and Memory, in *Myth & Memory: Stories of Indigenous-European Contact*, edited by John Sutton Lutz (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 50.

³⁶ Or “true news.” This is distinct from myth-age stories (called *sxwoxwiyem*) about the Xexá:ls’ (transformers’) journey throughout the Stó:lō homeland “making things right through transformations.” See *Power of Place*, 63-65.

³⁷ Carlson, “Reflections on Indigenous History and Memory,” 48-49.

of this class barrier.³⁸ Perhaps it was in Methodism and Euro-American society a chance to change the game in such a way that would facilitate his rise in a world that would otherwise have denied him the influence he desired.

This new world and Captain John's new faith had complicated consequences for him. Other leaders began to refuse to recognize his authority and he fell from the prominent position he once enjoyed. Early settler A.C. Wells explained in the Epworth transcript that he lost all the tributary influence, keeping only his own tribe's allegiance.³⁹ Since Captain John's lifelong dream to become a great and powerful chief this would have been a devastating blow. Furthermore, his relationship with his family and neighbours were strained for his attempted prohibition of indigenous practices on Soowahlie. One such episode occurred when he tried to intervene in his mother's winter dance (*smilha*) on Soowahlie. Captain John was unable to withstand the powerful forces to break the trance and instead was blasted backward and became entranced himself. According to Andy Commodore he never again tried to physically intervene in winter dances.⁴⁰ Being Methodist when most of the Aboriginal population in the area were Catholic and/or practiced indigenous religious rites would have been difficult, especially since Captain John was now convinced of the dangers of indigenous works such as winter dances and potlatches due to the influences of the Euro-American settlers in the area. Similarly, his new association with the white settler community via Methodism was another factor that put him in an uncomfortable position among many in the Ts'elxweyeqw and Stó:lō communities of the Lower Fraser.

³⁸ ³⁸ Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), ch. 1.

³⁹ A.C. Well, in Captain John, 9-10; I am unclear what exactly he means by "tribe."

⁴⁰ Keith Thor Carlson, *The Power of Place, the Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 326, n. 39.

For insight into how Captain John's worldview affected his relationship to indigenous customs and beliefs it is useful to consider how others in a similar position have struggled; the very candid anthology edited by James Treat entitled *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* is a good place to start.⁴¹ Treat calls attention to select Aboriginal Christians in the past and analyzes their complex social positions, located as they were between two seemingly contradictory cultural poles: Native and Euro-Christian. He also succinctly explains the apparent dilemma that many Aboriginal Christians struggled with and many Euro-Americans believed: "A relative who has become wholeheartedly Christian has lost some measure of native authenticity; a Christian who is still fully native has fallen short of Christian orthodoxy."⁴² This perceived catch 22 had detrimental effects on the minds of many Aboriginal converts to Christianity throughout the colonial period. It is also a contemporary and transnational phenomenon. For example, in 1999 at an academic conference on indigenous religions in Guatemala, the mayor of Quetzaltenango participated on a panel with an Evangelical preacher and a Catholic priest. Mayor Rigoberto Quemé Chay declared that one cannot be Maya and Christian at the same time.⁴³ Being Maya, he stated, implies a certain worldview as does being Christian, and the two are mutually exclusive. For Quemé Chay, it seems, religion and ethnicity are not independent components of identity, but are fused into one. The conviction of the reality of these cultural binaries would have applied to Captain John's evangelists as well, who encouraged him to shun any and all unorthodox practices on his reserve. Captain John's followers may have been resistant to such harsh claims against their indigenous

⁴¹ James Treat, ed, *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴³ Rigoberto Quemé Chay, Untitled presentation to a panel on indigenous religions, presented at the Canadian Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies Congress, La Antigua, Guatemala, February 1999.

works, such as winter dances, communication with spirits, and other activities not sanctioned by Euro-American society.

The 19th-century Sioux physician, Charles Alexander Eastman (or Ohiyesa before his teenage baptism) quite accurately pointed out that “The religion of the Indian . . . is the last thing about him that the men of another race will ever understand.”⁴⁴ Many missionaries held to essentialist definitions forced many Aboriginals responsive to the teachings of Jesus into a mould which they could never fill completely. James Treat states that “one must at least suspect that the process of Christianization has involved some internalization of the larger illusion of Indian inferiority and the idealization of white culture and religion.”⁴⁵ This appears to be the goal of colonization. Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’O demonstrates that colonization destroys “a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”⁴⁶ While it may be tempting to paint Captain John as a proud defender of Aboriginal culture, his low social position (if indeed he was *s’texem*) may have ensured that he did not have the tools necessary to do so.

It is important to point out that many Aboriginal Christians have rejected the association of the universalist message of the Bible with the more specific colonial pillars of Western assimilationist policies, which colonial European society smuggled into the Gospel message; the erroneous criteria for acceptance as a “full Christian” was rejected by many besides Eastman, such as Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii, William Apress of New England, Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) of Upper Canada, and Guaman Poma de Ayala of the Viceroyalty of Peru, to name a few diverse examples. All these Christian Aboriginal individuals have not shied away

⁴⁴ Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa), in Treat, 3.

⁴⁵ Treat, 3.

⁴⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’O, quoted in Bernd C. Peyer, *The Tutor’d Mind: Indian Missionary-Writers in Antebellum America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 3-4.

from using the moral teachings of the Bible to denounce the injustices of white settler society while remaining convinced of the ability to be fully Christian and fully Aboriginal simultaneously and without contradiction. But Captain John does not seem to have denounced the injustices of questionable land policies; on the contrary, he appears to have endorsed them, lending credence to Treat's suspicion mentioned above.

Given the scant evidence of the inner thoughts of Captain John, it would be difficult to recreate what his adopted faith meant to him and what he made it mean in this rapidly changing contact zone in the Chilliwack River Valley. This problem is compounded by the fact that the principal source of information he left behind was given in Chinook and translated into English by a white reverend with his own cultural lenses through which he made sense of his world.

Captain John's situation should also be considered in light of John Lutz's theory of the "moditional economy."⁴⁷ With colonial settlers came the capitalist economic model, which clashed with the traditional Stó:lō economic practices, most notably the potlatch system. But rather than one system devouring the other after a transitional period of co-existence, the two complimented each other and both cultures adapted to the new situation. Captain John simultaneously used the wealth that came from Euro-American capitalism to promote his prestige in Stó:lō society before his conversion. Otis Jasper suggested that a clue to understanding Captain John's actions may be found in the example of Paige Raibmon's work *Authentic Indians* where the author describes how the Kwakwaka-wakw simultaneously participated in the wage labour economy for the purpose of strengthening their defiance against settler society.⁴⁸ The same may be true of Captain John on an individual scale. He was surely

⁴⁷ John Sutton Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 23.

⁴⁸ Raibmon, ch. 1.

skillful at taking advantage of the new opportunities brought by Euro-Americans. With the new opportunities power dynamics shifted permitting him to gain the prestige he may not otherwise have been able to enjoy considering the meagre upbringing he describes and, if he had forgotten his history, his social disadvantage.⁴⁹ It was not a negation of his culture, but an opportunity for people in his class.

The Lekwungen of Vancouver Island, like Captain John, were particularly adept at taking full advantage of the capitalist economy that Europeans introduced. The very same Rev. Crosby, after convincing Chief Shee-at-Ston of Methodism's superiority over the other faiths, pushed for Euro-American social organization, which included private households instead of multi-family lodges, monogamy instead of polygyny, abstaining alcohol, and ceasing to practice spiritual rites considered non-Christian. After Shee-at-Ston converted, he quit his longhouse and unorthodox activities in favour of a private family residence and strict adherence to Euro-Christian practices.⁵⁰ Rev. Crosby was a persuasive and charismatic man who successfully spread the magnetic message of Methodism. If he could convince Chief Shee-at-Ston to reform his society based on European values like private property and monogamy, then it is not a stretch to believe that Captain John would have been likewise convinced to do the same in Soowahlie. If Chief Shee-at-Ston found Methodism convincing as a high ranking chief, then how much more appealing would it have been considered by someone of low birth? The lower echelons of societies is where the dissenting Methodists drew their greatest number of converts—such as Captain John's contemporary William Apess as far away as New England.

Although the redrawing of Soowahlie land made possible (perhaps) in part by Captain John made a dramatic impact on colonial conceptualizations of reserve land, this says little on

⁴⁹ Captain John.

⁵⁰ John Lutz, *Makúk*, 90-91.

how Aboriginal people conceptualized the change. Even today, contemporary members of the Soowahlie community refer to areas lost during the reduction, such as the north shores of Cultus Lake, as "our land." Otis Jasper called attention to the arbitrariness of Soowahlie's current borders in relation to the natural environment around it. Since surveyors never made it out to Soowahlie for a proper assessment, the borders were likely drawn in an office, giving it the shape of a square against what logical geographical and cultural markers would have been appropriate, such as Cultus Lake and the lookout point near Promontory.⁵¹

The changing conceptualization of Captain John has the potential of profound changes to Soowahlie historical consciousness. It is also clear that he rose to impressive heights in both Aboriginal or Euro-American societies in addition to learning the business skills necessary to succeed in British Columbian society better than the vast majority of gold-prospecting newcomers seeking their fortunes. Yet despite his wealth he lived a humble and dedicated life in service of his church doing what he believed was the best course of action for his community. It may be politically incorrect today to consider one's ancestral cultural practice as bad but the persuasion of the Methodists convinced Captain John in this dramatically changing contact zone. This religious transformation unfortunately brought with it colonial beliefs about "civilization" and "progress," which had the impact of estranging him from many of his friends and family, and costing him the allegiance of those chiefs under him. Much more research is necessary to write the final word on this impressive (if controversial) historical figure. This is intended as one possible explanation for the actions of the Chief of Chilliwack.

⁵¹ Otis Jasper.

Further Research

Larry Commodore agreed that a study on the inter-generational and changing conceptualizations of Captain John in the community would make for very interesting research. This may involve a project whereby the various generations are interviewed about their conceptions of Captain John and what they know about him. This may have secondary benefits of bringing out essential oral history yet uncovered on Captain John. I was told that Myra Sam would be an ideal informant on the topic of Captain John.

The status of Captain John before his appointment as chief is also needed to assess whether Captain John exploited the new economic opportunities to break through the class barriers from below, or whether it simply aided him in attaining a higher position in his own class. Oral history is paramount to this suggested research.

Captain John's relationship with Rev. Crosby and the Methodist settlers of 19th-century Sardis could add more detail to the picture of Captain John that is available so far. This may entail entries in missionary journals or records as well as oral history.

Soowahlie Reserve since 1864



The original Douglas reserve (1864-1868) is depicted as the largest (light red) shape. In 1868, Captain John may have consented to the reduction of Soowahlie to 600 acres, depicted in orange. After British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871, Soowahlie's borders were expanded as shown by the box-like shape. All borders are approximations intended to give a general idea of the changes.

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