

## Algonkian Governance in Southern New Netherlands colony during the 17<sup>th</sup> century

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North American Natives were certainly neither “new” nor “discovered,” in any significant way, as they represented an entire population and well established way of life for generations, but they *were* new to the understanding of Europeans as they first began to arrive on the rocky and sandy shores of the mid Atlantic. Many European explorers were very interested in Native peoples, from their manners and customs, to clothing, food, hierarchies, language and beliefs. In the service of science, trade, religion, commerce and likely a sense of exoticism intended to sell the wealthy a sense of worldliness. Many of these explorers undertook a sort of early anthropological role, striving to document and understand their new world neighbors. This early information-gathering assisted European powers in the political and military conflicts that would ensue. Of these “manners and customs” so aptly described by Moravian missionary Johannes Heckwelder in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans often remarked in journals and documents about the Algonkian-speaking peoples’ complex forms of government.

When participating and observing in indigenous forms of governance in the Eastern Woodlands, Europeans were especially focused in establishing the key arbiters of political power. From their perspective, having only recently left the feudal period of the Middle Ages and still heavily controlled by the twin titans of monarchy and church, it was vital to identify the central locus of power around a monarch—and nearly unthinkable to consider governance without such absolute authority. Europeans relate many political actors/actions in North America to their own understanding, translating local political arbiters as “kings” or “queens,” even though such Euro-Asiatic titles and concepts did not exist among the indigenous people and communities in the Eastern Woodlands.

Among Algonkian-speaking people, the governing body was led by a Sachem/Sakima and often included (as found in New England) a vice chief called a Sagamore, War Chiefs and Peace Chiefs, whose official titles have been lost to time. Hereditary chieftainship was common, though not pervasive. Sachems were known to be polygamous, often to unite smaller communities into a larger kinship fold to strengthen their confederacy. It was also the duty of a Sachem to take in and provide for widowed mothers and their children.

These chiefs presided over a council comprised people of varying ages, sexes and experiences, the council sometimes as large as two hundred members. William Penn writes in 1683, *“Their governance is by kings which they call Sachema[Sakima], and those by succession, but always of the mothers side, for instance, the children of him that is now king, will not succeed, but his brother by the mother, or the children of his sister, whose sons (and after them the children of her daughter) will reign, for no woman inherits; the reason they render for this way of decent is, that their issue may not be spurious[illegitimate offspring].”*(1) Penn is incorrect about female chiefdoms, which did occur among many Algonkian people, and persist to the modern era. Female chiefs were sometimes referred to as “Squaw Sachems” or “SunkSquaw” (“squaw” is derived from a New England Algonkian word for woman, and only became derogatory in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century due to lack of historical and context). In Virginia and Maryland, a female chief of the Pocomoke in 1652 was called “Weroancesqua.” One of the most famous female chiefs was Weetamoo of the Pocasset Wampanoag. Although female chiefs certainly existed, it was never the historical norm, and this role was typically held by men. Penn takes pains to describe the importance and power of the councils: *“Every King hath his council, and that consults all the old and wise men of his nation, which perhaps is two hundred people. Nothing of moment is undertaken; be it war, peace, selling of land or traffic, without advising with them; and which is more, with the young men too. ‘Tis admirable to consider, how powerful the kings are, and yet how they move by the breadth of their people. I have had on occasion to be in council with them upon treaties for land, and to adjust the terms of trade; their order is thus: The king sits in the middle of an half moon, and hath his council, the old and wise on each side; behind them, or at a little distance, sit the younger fry, in the same figure”*(2)

Of the many 17<sup>th</sup> century European traders, merchants, soldiers and diplomats, the works of Aidriaen Van Der Donck are one of the most descriptive when it comes to Algonkian-speaking peoples in New Netherlands, in particular southern New Netherlands . In his work, “A Description of New Netherland,” Van Der Donck describes the government at length near the end of his section on Native peoples. He relates the general structure, how their councils commence, and their methods of administration of justice and penalties. When addressing general governance, he records, *“Government is of the popular kind, so much so that it is in many respects, defective and lame. It consists of the chiefs, the nobles[council members] and the tribal and family elders. Only when military matters are being considered are the war chiefs consulted as well. Those together constitute all there is of council, governance and rule. They consider everything at great length and spare no time when the matter is of any importance.”* (3) Once councils had been created and commenced, an oratory was given before deliberation by an orator; when speaking in large companies, and often times with Europeans, a speaker was usually

appointed. Each chief would have a speaker to represent his opinions and concerns; chiefs in the 17<sup>th</sup> century rarely speaking on their own behalf, preferring these appointed orators. William Penn recounts the usage of these speakers in his 1683 letter to the committee of the free society of traders of London: *“Having consulted and resolved their business, the King [Sachem/Sukima] ordered one of them [those sitting at the Sukima’s council this could be older or younger people] to speak to me; he stood up, came to me, and in the name of his king saluted me, then took me by the hand, and told me, that he was ordered by his king to speak to me, and that now it was not he, but the King that spoke because what he should say was the King’s mind.”*(4)

These orations could take hours and in some cases days or even weeks. Van Der Donck writes, *“when a matter has been decided in the aforesaid manner, the populous is summoned to the Chief’s house, or wherever the council has met. A person gifted with eloquence, and a strong, penetrating voice is called upon to speak. He recounts in the fullest detail, in a formal address and as agreeably as he can, what was deliberated, decided, and resolved. Then there is a silence all around, and meanwhile, the Chiefs try to gain the communities approval of the decisions. If they encounter difficulties, they have various means of securing acceptance, for the commonality normally has to carry out what has been decided, and without its consent, they cannot make much progress. therefore, each of them, recommend the matter, particularly and earnestly to the family, in which he is foremost”* (5) William Penn corroborates the long duration of council meetings when speaking of the council he had with the Lenape in Philadelphia in 1683. He writes that the speaker tells him *“It was the Indian custom to deliberate, and take up much time in council, before they resolve”* (6)

Once councils had convened and decisions made, justice and occasionally penalties would ensue, punishments usually being administered by the Sachem. Among Algonkian-speaking people, punishments were dealt with very differently than by Europeans. Though many European writers describe the misdeeds that faced punishments, those that were in contradiction with Christian doctrine were most often highly sensationalized, specifically things like murder, false witness and adultery, likely to emphasize Native peoples’ pagan status.

This is not to say that Algonkian life was idyllic or free from problems. The most common crimes involving jurisprudence were murder and theft. Penn recounts this manner of justice, *“The justice they have is pecuniary: in case of any wrong or evil faet, be it murder itself, they atone by feasts and presents of their wampum, which is proportioned to the quality of the offense or person injured, or of the sex they are of: for in case they kill a woman, they pay [Algonkian people had no*

concept of currency, instead of pay read gift] double, and the reason they render is, that she breadeth children, which men cannot do. It's rare that they fall out, if sober; and if drunk, they forgive it, saying it was the drink and not the man, that abused them”(7) Van Der Donck again corroborates this “for the rest, I never heard of any serious transgressions during the nine years I was there, other than theft, which is fairly common among them, though not in large hauls; it may be a knife, an ax, a pair of shoes, or stockings, and suchlike. If one catches the thief in the act, one may boldly repossess the item and box his ears, but if the loss is discovered later, it must be reported to the chief. He will usually return the article to you and sharply reprimand the thief, even though the chief punishes his subjects no worse than in words, it is incredible how they fear this and how little mischief is done, by and large much less than in our community with its energetic administration of justice.(8)

When addressing how Algonkian communities deal with murder, Van Der Donck explains “manslaughter and injuries to the person concern the chief's and the culprit's kin only insofar as atonement can be made, they not only promote this stronglybut will also contribute literally should the culprit lack the means, as is frequently, the case, for manslaughter is not expiated without much money[gifts or resources]. The closest relative is always the avenger, and if he can get his hands on the killer within 24 hours, he slays him in turn and with impunity. If the killer can avoid capture and death for a while, the avenger is protected by the closest kin during that time, but after 24 hours have elapsed, action is seldom taken. Even so, the killer must flee and stay undercover while kin try to settle the terms of the atonement. It is rare for anyone to be condemned to death, other than prisoners of war, infringing the law of nations. (9)

What is telling about this passage is that not only was capital punishment rare and alternative methods were used to gain justice and reciprocity, but that when accused of murder, not only was the “avenger” allowed to seek their revenge with impunity for twenty-four hours but if the accused murderer successfully hid and survived that twenty-four-hour period, he and his kin were allowed to figure out how to make reprimands or atonement.

This plays out multiple times in the history of New Netherlands Colony. In 1641, a Wequaesgeek warrior killed Claes Switz in revenge of his uncle, who had been slain by Switz 20 years prior. When Director General Kieft asks for the warrior to be given up, he is refused due to the kinship protocols described by Van Der Donck. During the Esopus Wars of the late 1650's and early 1660's, when questioned by Director General Stuyvesant about killings of farm animals and settlers,

the Esopus answered that it was a Neversink Indian that was accused of the crime in the Esopus country and that he had run away to Haverstraw. The documents state, *“Stuyvesant asked the Esopus through his translator Jacob Jansen Stoll to explain why they had carried out “murders, arson, killed hogs and did other injuries and continually threatened the inhabitants of the Esopus.” Then: one of the sachems stood up and said in reply that the Dutch sold the bisson, that is brandy, to the Indians and were consequently the cause that the Indians then became cacheus, that is crazy, mad or drunk and then committed outrages; that they, the chiefs, could not control the young men, who then were spoiling for fight; that the murder had not been committed by one of their tribe, but by a Neuwesinck Indian, who was now living at Haverstroo or thereabouts; that the Indian, who set fire to the houses, had run away and would henceforth not be permitted to cultivate his land. As far as they were concerned, they had done no evil, they were not angry nor did they desire or intend to fight, but they had no control over the young men”*(10), All of this following the protocol written by Van Der Donck.

To Europeans, the governments of the indigenous peoples of the Eastern Woodlands appeared drastically foreign and ineffectual, but these bodies were as complex and hierarchical as Europe's, by no means “primitive” or “savage” as later authors implied. European societies were largely built upon the structure of the divine right monarchy; whether nobles, military officers, magistrates, director generals and even, to a degree, owners of property or companies, each level of authority was, within its domain, considered to be a representative of the crown, backed accordingly with its nearly absolute power. A European official could, generally, issue immediate and absolute decisions within his purview, and those orders were often executed without question. Europeans, therefore, were used to a certain level of expediency in law, trial and decision making. Often what Europeans perceived and described as “ineffectual” was the simple latency of direct command structures, frequent cumbersome debates among large bodies in which many had the unequivocal right to speak, and the lengthy, albeit relaxed, manner in which justice was served as compared to their own experiences of governance.

However, after a few generations of exposure to the decentralized power structures of a more democratic method, the descendants of those original scandalized Europeans who encountered Algonkian peoples' radically different form of government during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, combined elements of Eastern Woodland governance and the

classical patterns of Greece and Rome to create the unique blend of representational democracy in the United States Constitution.

The lengthy and often eloquent tradition of debates on our Senate and House floors not only have their roots in ancient Rome, but also among Algonkian orators representing the views of their chiefs, councils representing the interests of people and clans to paramount chiefs, and individuals retaining the right to address the governing council to air concerns. Like Eastern Woodland governance, the United States has multiple layers of houses—our councils—beginning at the local level and working up to state and national levels, allowing our people to come to agreement in progressively larger groups, just as Algonkian peoples did. Not only do these base elements remain laced through our national political life, but if one of these European explorers, diplomats, colonists, proprietors or soldiers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were to appear among a modern Algonkian tribal community, he would immediately recognize the procedures and structures of government he saw; many tribes continue to be governed by a council of elders, chiefs, vice chiefs and maintain a tradition of orators to perform formal addresses.

While many of those Europeans who documented Algonkian governance were seeking understanding of their neighbors specifically in order to gain diplomatic, military and economic dominance in the region, ultimately centuries of colonization, displacement and even removal still failed to change the fundamental structures of Algonkian tribal governance.

#### Citations

1. William Penn , letter , 1683 XXII, pg 6,7
2. William Penn , letter , 1683 XXII, pg 6,7
4. Van Der Donck, pg 105, paragraph 1
5. William Penn , letter , 1683 XXII, pg 7
6. Van Der Donck, pg 105 , 106 , paragraph 1 and 2
7. William Penn , letter , 1683 XXII, pg 7
8. William Penn , letter , 1683 XXII, pg 7
9. Van Der Donck, pg 106, paragraph 2

10. Dutch Colonization and the Catalyst for the First Esopus War, Franklin Eck with supervised research conducted with Dr. Paul Kelton , Stonybrook University, Under Graduate History Journal, 2020)

11.

<http://1704.deerfield.history.museum/popups/glossary.do?shortName=sunksqua>