An exciting development in maritime history has been the expansion of its subject matter from a narrow concern with ships and seafarers to consideration of larger topics, especially in the realms of social history and anthropology. This has strengthened maritime history, brought it into closer alignment with mainstream history, and made important contributions to our knowledge of the past. Wallace Olson’s article vividly illustrates this trend.

—The Editors

“I can say nothing but great good of these Natives”

Encounters between Spaniards and Native Alaskans

Wallace M. Olson
The expansion of the Spanish maritime empire into the Pacific world led to many Spanish encounters with indigenous peoples. In general, those encounters were destructive, sometimes to both sides, but almost always to the native peoples. In one exception to that pattern, however, along the coast of Alaska Spanish and native cultures encountered each other in the late eighteenth century without the tragedy that usually followed such meetings. This exception to the rule was the work of “honorable” men and women on both sides.

To understand these encounters, one has to understand the culture of the native societies, as well as that of the Spanish officials in the area. It is especially important to understand some key points about the Tlingit people of Southeastern Alaska. In the eighteenth century, Native groups in the north coastal Pacific Northwest were on the move. For example, as the Haida were expanding out of the Queen Charlotte Islands into Tlingit territory, the Tlingit were moving north, forcing the Eyak into a small area on the mouth of the Copper River.

In a time of such pressures between groups, warfare and raiding for revenge or slaves was widespread. In Tlingit oral history, there are many accounts of bloody battles both among the Tlingit themselves and with outsiders. Some European visitors noted that nearly every adult male had scars on their bodies from combat. In the eighteenth century, the Tlingit found it necessary to build sanctuaries (called Noo in their language), stockades to which they could retreat during an attack. Among the outside observers who took note of this practice was a Spanish naval officer, Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra.

Several early fur traders described the Tlingit as arrogant, belligerent and extremely sensitive to any insult or shame. English trader Nathaniel Portlock wrote that

they are very easily irritated, and would very little scruple to kill you when they think themselves injured. More than once I had nearly experienced that fate from some trifling disagreements in trade.1

British explorer George Vancouver’s men had opened fire on Tlingit who tried to steal weapons and other objects, while the Russians had many battles with them. Thus, when studying Spanish diaries and journals, one would expect to find an account of a battle or attack but in fact, although there were several confrontations, there was no bloodshed beyond the accidental deaths of two Tlingit at Spanish hands.

In order to understand why interactions between the Tlingit and Spanish were not characterized by bloodshed, it helps to grasp some essential aspects of Tlingit culture. Then as now, Tlingit society remains based on a moiety system; that is, they are divided into two general groups, the Ravens and Eagles, with large extended families (clans) on each side. Their permanent winter settlements consisted of several large plank houses, capable of holding forty or sixty people, who were related matrilineally—that is, through their mothers’ families. Each house was an independent social and economic unit with its own spokesman. The Tlingit term for these men is bit s’atti: “owner of the house,” the highest-ranking individual in Tlingit society. (In the modern writing system for Tlingit, the apostrophe indicates that the preceding sound is much more forceful or “pinched.”) Their authority was

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At left, when Alejandro Malaspina and his men visited Port Mulgrave, they met Tlingit people, including the leader above.

Details from drawings by José Cardero and Tomás Soria, courtesy Museo Naval, Madrid

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limited to one particular house with no power or authority over any other house; they could only try and persuade others to follow their advice. Within each settlement there could be several bit s'atti. Although the Spanish identified some men as chiefs (jefes or caciques), no tribal, clan or village chiefs exist—which explains why the "chiefs" the Spanish encountered could not simply issue orders as Spanish officers did. In Tlingit, aristocrats and house spokesmen are called aanyátx'i—"descendants of the land"—and are expected to live up to the highest ideals of honor in Tlingit culture. In almost every case when there was a dispute or confrontation between the Spanish and the Indians, the ones who helped bring about a peaceful solution were aanyátx'i. The Tlingit had their own laws and ethical code, with inter-clan relationships based upon group reciprocity. If a man were insulted, humiliated, injured or killed, for example, it was a crime against his entire family. On the other hand, if individuals were treated with kindness, and others were helpful and generous, a Tlingit was expected to reciprocate with similar behavior.

On the Spanish side, what was responsible for the comparatively peaceful relations? There seem to be several factors involved. At times while they were on shore, the Indians greatly outnumbered the Spanish. As Antonio de Tova of the Malaspina expedition observed in his journal, firearms would have been of limited use in these situations because, "once fired, it would not have been possible to reload before being trampled by the crowd." Secondly, the Europeans did not find any gold or valuable minerals. The only item of value

This 1802 Spanish map reveals how surprisingly far Spain's explorers ranged along the Alaskan coast.

Courtesy Museo Naval, Madrid
was fur, especially the pelts of the sea otters that the Natives were willing to trade. In addition, the Spanish did not attempt to establish any permanent settlement as the Russians had done. Both sides were interested in continuing good trade relations.

As one looks at the events that took place and the participants in those encounters, however, one is struck too by the caliber of the individuals involved—both Native leaders and Spanish officers. The journals indicate that in the various disputes or confrontations, Native leaders lived up to their traditional cultural values and ethos. Likewise, all of the Spanish commanders of the voyages out of San Blas were well trained, professional and experienced naval officers. The officers and men on the Malaspina expedition were likewise some of the finest in the Spanish Navy. When the Spanish met the Tlingit, both sides had very distinct, and not incompatible, understandings of “honorable” behavior.

Another factor that influenced the behavior of the Spanish officers were their official instructions, whose humanitarian overtones were clearly products of the European Enlightenment. Prior to the first voyage north in 1774, the Viceroy of

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Spain's Legacy in the Pacific
New Spain, Antonio María Bucareli y Ursúa, issued a long list of orders and instructions, some of which governed relations with Native peoples. The commander, for example, was instructed not to
take anything from the Indians against their will, but only in barter or given to them in friendship. All must be treated with kindness and gentleness, which is the most efficacious means of gaining and firmly establishing their esteem. Thus, those who may return to these places for the purpose of establishing settlements, if it be so decided, will be well received.

Likewise, the commander must
maintain good order among the crew, looking after them both when sailing and when a landing must be made, in order to prevent lack of obedience or of good treatment of the Indians against whom force will never be used except when it is necessary for self-defense.

"Under no circumstances," the instructions insist, should he "antagonize the Indians or forcibly take possession of the land."

The expeditions of 1774, 1775 and 1779 took place while Bucareli was Viceroy, but on all the subsequent voyages out of San Blas, there were officers in command who had been on previous voyages. It seems that Bucareli's instructions established a policy and tradition that prevailed on the later voyages to Alaska.
An example of the Viceroy's influence occurred on the evening of June 4, 1779, during the survey of the Bucareli Bay area. The survey party went ashore to cook their supper, but the meal was not yet ready when a large number of Tlingit came ashore, threateningly, from their own canoes. Rather than confront the Indians, the Spanish quietly loaded the half-cooked food into their boats and moved to another location. In his journal, Juan Pantoja explains that the Indians thought it was their threats that drove Spanish away, but

The real reason we left the port to them was the fact that we viewed them with compassion and the orders which had been given to the two First Pilots that we were supposed to treat them with charity as our neighbors.

Another dispute that could have erupted into a fight, but did not, occurred on June 13, 1779, when several sailors went ashore to do laundry. When they were ready to return to the ships, the men noticed that two of the sailors were missing; they had deserted and intended to stay with the Indians. When the officers learned what had happened, they seized a Tlingit and took him on board as a hostage to secure the return of the deserters. Then an old man (probably a respected hit s'aati) came in a canoe and told them the sailors would be returned in the morning. The hostage on board was treated very well. He was given plenty of food, a bed in the officers' quarters, and was even entertained with music. The next morning, several canoes came out and the Indian hostage pleaded with them to return the sailors. The men in the canoes, however, refused to do so. They laughed and jeered at the hostage's request. He became very angry; he was so upset that he could not eat.
Both ships then tried to take more Indian hostages to force an exchange. In doing this, the flagship fired its swivel guns several times. When the crew of the Favorita saw Indians climbing aboard the flagship, they mistakenly thought that the Tlingit were attacking and fired a cannon. The Indians in a nearby canoe panicked; some fell overboard, and one, or possibly two, were killed. The ships immediately sent out their longboats to rescue the survivors. The Indians were brought aboard and given blankets, food and gifts. With these new hostages, the deserters were eventually returned.

As the Spanish were leaving the Bucareli Bay area, some Indians came alongside the ship and indicated that there had been a large gathering of Tlingit in the nearby port of Saint Anthony. There had been a quarrel amongst them over something that took place on the day the sailors were returned to the ships, and two men were beheaded. The Spanish could not understand what had occurred or why, although a likely explanation is that the executions were repercussions from the incident in which the hostage, on board the Spanish ship, had pleaded unsuccessfully with the men in the canoes, who had jeered him. According to Tlingit law and custom this was a major insult to the man and his family, one for which someone would have to pay. The two men beheaded may have been either those who had insulted the hostage, or were members of their families or their slaves.
In another case, while at Port Mulgrave Captain José Bustamente went ashore, accompanied by other officers and sailors. A Tlingit picked up one of the sailors and started to carry him off. Bustamente ordered the Indian to release the sailor. He complied, but then drew his dagger and rushed threateningly towards Bustamente, who raised his unloaded shotgun. The Indian called to the others to join him in the attack; some pulled knives and surrounded the Spanish. Bustamente, however, survived to write in his diary that

The *ankau* remained aloof for some time, not wishing to show that he was an accomplice in this matter. However, in the end he decided to speak in a low voice to those most incensed to convince them or diminish their fear. Then he spread out his arms and intoned a hymn of peace.  

Diaries kept by Bustamente and other members of the Malaspina expedition speak of one leader at Port Mulgrave as *ankau*, a transcription of the Tlingit *aankáawu*: a rich man or leader, perhaps the leading *bit s'atti* (house spokesman) in the summer camp. Antonio de Tova wrote in his journal that the “*ankau* was not disposed to stopping the uprising, either because he did not want to compromise his authority or he did not want to do it out of bad faith toward us.”

There is another explanation for the *ankau*’s behavior, suggested by Malaspina’s mention that other Tlingit had come into Port Mulgrave from outlying settlements. The *ankau* was more than likely a house spokesman with authority only over the people of his house. He was not, as the Spanish assumed, the leader or chief of all the people. It may have been that those poised to attack were not from his house, so he may have had no authority, power or control over them. The most that he could do was to try and persuade the others to not start a fight, which he appears to have done by stretching out his arms and intoning a hymn. Fortunately, the Tlingit stepped aside and let Bustamente and his men return to their ship.

An *ankau* pleads for peace at Port Mulgrave.

*Anonymous drawing and 1791 map courtesy Museo Naval, Madrid*
Relations between the Spanish and Native people could be downright warm, as occurred in 1790. The commander of that expedition, Salvador Fidalgo, treated the Alutiq Eskimos of Prince William Sound well, and in return, one of their leaders was very helpful:

The character of these people shows that they are quite vigorous, cautious, and that they do not lack courage; they are honest and obedient to their Chief; since, when I gave them to understand that I wanted them to go away to sleep, at the slightest sign from their Chief they departed. They became very friendly with the sailors, since they went to where the sailors were cutting wood, and helped them, taking the axes; and the sailors shared their Rations with them; so that I can say nothing but great good of these Natives, because they served me in whatever I needed, especially in the most northern part of the great Bay, where the Chief of the Villages of that region went as Pilot, embarking in the Launch with the Pilots Dn. Antonio Serantes and Dn. Estevan Mondofía, whom he guided very well, and showed that which one could only explore with great difficulty without a Pilot.

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other important facet of Tlingit culture was the degree to which women were respected. Older women, in particular, often wielded a fair amount of power and authority—and could be as belligerent as the men. For example, when the Tlingit tried to steal guns and other items from Vancouver's survey party, the British began shooting at them. Most of the Tlingit men ran away, but an old woman, who had been sitting in the stern of the canoe, kept urging them to fight.

José Espinosa y Tello described an incident which took place as Malaspina's ships were leaving Port Mulgrave, which illustrated the role of women in Tlingit culture:

We were accompanied along by some natives in their canoes, and in one of them was a woman who carried a baby girl at her breast in her arms. Out of thanks, Don Francisco Flores, our surgeon, threw her some small bells from the stern of the ship, telling her to give them to the child as decoration. He went to the quarterdeck near the gangway and turned to see the canoe, and moved by compassion repeated his presents. The woman, not being able to suppress her thanks, quickly cut in half one of the skins she was wearing, and placing it on the head of the infant as if it were in the child's name, she gave it to the surgeon. Out of gratitude, the spirit of those around was moved and they began to present her with one or the other small gifts. Rather than to accede on this occasion to the dictates of poverty, she preferred to compete with us equally in generosity, continuing her gifts to us with equal commitment, finally she was left entirely stripped of the skins that covered her.

Although the Spaniards' motives may have been mixed in this case, the woman was behaving as an honorable Tlingit. Espinosa y Tello continues, revealing something of his own culture's understanding of honor:

In the end it might be believed that we were the winners in this contest but that would be diminishing the just admiration that the conduct of this woman produced in us. It would seem that she not only wished to erase from our memory the little thanks that we had received from her people, but also to remind us that even in these harsh climates, that as a woman, she possessed the sweet character and kindness that distinguish her sex in all parts of the world.
In his monumental work on the Spanish in the Pacific, Warren Cook called the eighteenth century *Flood Tide of Empire*. The high water mark of that flood was the last quarter of the eighteenth century, in southeastern Alaska. It was a time when there could have been conflict and bloodshed between Spanish and natives—but there was none. If we look at the events both from historical documents and anthropological perspectives, it seems clear that the main reason that these encounters remained peaceful was the fact that on both sides it was notions of honorable behavior—and cool heads—that prevailed.

**NOTES**