

Michael Puglisi, "Reading Between the Lines: Early English Accounts of the New England Indians" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 24, No. 1 (Winter 1996).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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Reading Between the Lines: Early English Accounts of the New England Indians

Michael J. Puglisi

"The Indian people in these parts at the English first coming," wrote Edward Johnson in 1653, "were very barbarous and uncivilized."¹ This statement reflects the general attitude with which most English Puritans approached New England, and which most other Europeans brought to other parts of North America. Even with the obvious bias present in the early chronicles of New England, however, if they use the proper approach to the documents, modern readers can learn important lessons about the cultural clash which occurred some three and a half centuries ago. In recent years, historians have begun to reexamine interpretations of many topics, particularly those concerning social and cultural perspectives, reflecting growing appreciation for their importance.

One area which has received a great deal of attention is the intricate and important story of the relations between Native Americans and European colonizers, through the methodologies and interpretation of ethnohistory. Far from being the passive victims of the westward advance of European civilization so often portrayed in history and tradition, the Indians of New England — as elsewhere — were active participants in the contact situation, possessing vibrant, integral cultures with their own sets of priorities, preconceptions, plans, and motivations — all very real, all very human — which guided their relations with the colonists. Modern readers must understand these cultures, in their own right, if they are to fully understand the initial contact periods of American history. Early English accounts reveal much through their basic descriptions of life in the region, but further, by reading between the lines, so to speak, with the help of the interdisciplinary ethnohistorical approach, readers can also learn a

1. Edward Johnson, Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Savior in New England, 1628-1651, ed. by J. Franklin Jameson (New York, 1910), p. 262.

great deal about the perspectives of the English society which produced them, as well as about the natives' world beyond the knowledge or discernment of the colonial chroniclers.

On the first and most obvious level, contemporary chroniclers reflected the inherent attitudes and biases of English colonial society. Europeans, in general, regarded Native Americans as savage and uncivilized. This bias, however, does not render the documents useless. Historians cannot blame or indict seventeenth-century colonists for their views; rather, students of the colonial period must take these prejudices into account in evaluating the sources, because their biases affected what the chroniclers saw, or thought they saw. When Johnson wrote of the "sordid spirits of the Neighbouring Indians," or when William Bradford described "a savage people, who are cruel, barbarous, and most treacherous," they revealed more about their preconceptions and expectations than about their experiences.²

The Puritans represent an even more extreme case, as compared to other Englishmen, in the level of their bias, and therefore are an even greater challenge to study, because their religious beliefs and goals made them introspective and intolerant. Their observations were consistently couched in terms of "the errand into the wilderness," and they held everything and everyone they came into contact with to the same high standards they expected of themselves. Nothing could happen by chance in the Puritan view of things, and all occurrences had a meaning associated with the mission. In noting the colonists' initially vulnerable position, for instance, Johnson concluded that "the Lord so awed [the natives'] hearts, that although they frequented the Englishmen's places of abode," they did no harm to the settlers or their property.³ It seems never to have occurred to Johnson or most of his contemporaries that the natives' own merits or motives may have guided their actions.

According to Puritan documents, as soon as the colonists arrived in New England the Indians became unwitting participants in "God's plan" for the region. Writers interpreted deadly epidemics among the natives, for instance, as evidence that Providence favored the colonial enterprise, clearing the land "for his people," "to further their designs in planting the Churches of

2. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 45; William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647, ed. by Samuel Eliot Morison (New York, 1966), p. 26.

3. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 92.

Christ," ignoring any hint of their own role in introducing contagious diseases into the region. Ironically, Johnson also admitted that "naturally the Country is very healthy," making the effects of the natives' demise all the more wondrous.⁴ Another perceived blessing of the epidemics was that they "tamed the hard and cruel hearts of these barbarous Indians." During a 1631 land dispute, the colonists took satisfaction in God "smiting the Indians with a sore Disease . . . of which great numbers of them died." "Thus," from the Puritan viewpoint, "did the Lord allay their quarrelsome spirits."⁵ A commonly expressed view held that the colonists received aid in their struggle against the Indians by God "sending the Evil Arrows of Famine and Mortal Disease among them," thereby facilitating the triumph of civilization.⁶ These interpretations obviously reveal more about the attitudes of the English writers than about the circumstances undermining the health of their native subjects.

On another level, the same documents provide adequate, if superficial, descriptions of some of the more tangible aspects of native society. New England chroniclers often attempted to paint verbal pictures of the unfamiliar culture they observed, and their descriptions reveal much that is useful to modern students about the physical and material world of the Indians. As far as the observations were based on what the writers actually saw, they tended to present an accurate portrayal; the accuracy was limited, however, by those facets of native culture which were beyond the colonists' sight or understanding.

New Englanders frequently commented on the Indians' apparel, or lack thereof, from the English perspective. They documented the fact that the natives were most commonly "clothed with a Deers Skin . . . cover[ing] their privy part," with women covered slightly more modestly than were the men. In addition, there are some references to moccasins, "breeches, and stockings" made of the same leather, as well as the skins of various animals

4. Ibid., pp. 40-41.

5. Ibid., pp. 41 and 79-80.

6. "A Brief Relation of the State of New England, From the Beginning of that Plantation to this Present Year, 1689," in Peter Force, ed., Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America From the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1776 (4 vols., 1847, reprint Gloucester, Mass., 1963), IV: 5.

such as beaver, bear, and moose.⁷ These straight-forward descriptions, based on simple physical observations, provide information about native styles of dress, as well as the wildlife of the region, not to mention English attitudes about modesty.

Similarly, the colonists recorded descriptions of Indian houses and building techniques, whereby

they gather Poles in the woods and put the great end of them in the ground, placing them in [the] forme of a circle or circumference, and bendinge the toppes of them in forme of an Arch, they bind them together with the Barke of Walnut trees . . . so that they make [them] round on the topp . . . these they cover with matts, some made of reeds, and some long flagges, or sedge, finely sowed together with needles made of the splinter bones of a Cranes legg, with threads made of their Indian Hempe. . . .⁸

Further, colonists described how the Indians left "severall places for doores, which are covered with mats, which may be rowled up and let downe again at their pleasure," and how the roofs were solid "save for a small place in the middle . . . to give light, and let out the smoke."⁹

The chroniclers intended to describe the appearance of aboriginal housing, but in doing so, they also indicated the methodologies and technological skills employed by the natives. Thanks to the reports, modern scholars know what materials the Indians used for framing, binding, and covering their houses, how they constructed the structures, how they accommodated entrance ways, that they heated the houses with internal fires, and that they made provisions to release the smoke while preserving their shelter. Ethnographic pictures — whether visual or verbal — when

7. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 262; Winslow's Relation," in Alexander Young, Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth, 1602-1625 (Boston, 1841), p. 365; Thomas Morton, "New England Canaan or New Canaan, Containing an Abstract of New England," in Force, ed., Tracts and Other Papers, II: 21-22.

8. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 162.

9. Morton, "New England Canaan," pp. 19-20; Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 162.

accurately drawn, can reveal far deeper indications about cultural ways than mere surface appearances.



Illustration by Christopher Switzer

Early on, from their discovery and appropriation of buried Indian corn during their initial forays onto Cape Cod, New England colonists took a great interest in the foodways of their neighbors, sometimes out of a state of dependence for survival, but more often as a result of the natives' hospitality toward visitors. Not surprisingly, references to corn and corn products dominate the accounts, but there are also frequent mentions of wild foodstuffs, such as chestnuts and blackberries, along with fish, shellfish, and meat, ranging from deer to wildfowl and small mammals such as "rockoons."¹⁰ Reflecting the variety of the native diet, these early menus also reveal the seasonal nature of the aboriginal subsistence system as a healthy mixture of organized

10. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, pp. 114 and 162; for accounts of native food resources in the region, see Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, p. 90; "Mourt's Relation," in George C. Cheever, The Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth (New York, 1848), p. 95; "Winslow's Relation," in Young, Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers, p. 306.

agriculture, systematic gathering, and effective hunting. In describing what the Indians consumed, the colonists also indicated how they acquired their nourishment.

That the natives recognized a reliance on seasonal resources is clearly portrayed in the colonists' descriptions of Indian "barns," — "holes in the earth, that will hold a hogshead of corne . . . in great baskets . . . with matts under, about the sides and on top," and then covered with earth or sand. Thomas Morton noted that although the natives enjoyed an abundance of corn during the summer, "they [took] care to keep a convenient portion thereof; to releave them in the dead of winter."¹¹

On the third, and most significant level, modern readers can learn about the *world* of the New England Indians from early English chroniclers, by "reading between the lines" and interpreting less tangible components of native life, which the colonists either misunderstood or of which they had incomplete knowledge. It was one thing for the newcomers to observe and record what the Indians ate, what they wore, or how they built their houses. It was quite another for them to explain *why* the natives did what they did, or to accurately portray the nuances behind apparently strange religious, economic, or social practices. Further, much of the Indian world remained hidden from the eyes of the early English colonists, and researchers can only fill in the gaps by supplementing their accounts with other ethnographic information.

While English writers gave credible accounts of the native diet and food-storage practices, they also reported that in lean periods the Indians were "very patient in fasting, and [would] gird in their bellies till they [met] with food."¹² This provides an example in which colonists accurately recorded what they saw, but could not comprehend the meaning or motive behind the action. To Europeans whose economy and subsistence system revolved around harnessing nature, rather than harvesting what it had to offer, stoically enduring hunger for days at a time made no sense. They simply could not understand acceptance of a diet based on

 11. Morton, "New England Canaan," p. 30; see Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, p. 65; Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 109.

12. George L. Kittredge, ed., "Letters of Samuel Lee and Samuel Sewall, Relating to New England and the Indians," Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, XIV (1912): 148.

seasonal cycles and resources, because they were accustomed to a controlled market system.

Morton provided a surprisingly good description and explanation of the natives' seasonal migratory pattern, noting that the fuel supply became depleted very quickly around village sites, and that different habitats offered different resources seasonally.¹³ More commonly, English observers echoed the opinion expressed by Francis Higginson that "The Indians are not able to make use of the one fourth part of the Land, neither have they any settled places as Townes to dwell in"14 This attitude reflects the ingrained European concept of land use and ownership, combined with a general inability to recognize the purposes and value of the aboriginal settlement pattern. Far from living a random impoverished existence, New England Indians developed a system which allowed them to maximize their use of resources in nature. Most English writers misinterpreted what they saw in regard to the native's coexistence with the natural environment.

While New Englanders could accurately describe the native practice of "set[ting] fire to the country . . . twice a yeare," they often failed in their efforts to explain the motive for the practice. Morton, for instance, posited that without regular burning, the forests "would otherwise be so overgrown with underweedes . . . [that] the people would not be able in any wise to pass through the country out of a beaten path."¹⁵ It never occurred to him that burning off multiple acres of growth in order to facilitate passage by narrow paths constituted an illogically gross case of overkill. Johnson hit closer to the mark when he suggested that the Indians set the fires "that they may not be hindered in hunting." Certainly, periodic burning did provide clear hunting ranges, but even this interpretation does not completely address the fact that, as the seasonally oriented native hunters must have recognized, the practice also encouraged new growth, which attracted game animals.¹⁶ Unaccustomed to the

13. Morton, "New England Canaan," p. 20.

14. Francis Higginson, "New England's Plantation; or a Short and True Description of the Commodities and Discommodities of that Countrey," in Force, ed., Tracts and Other Papers, I: 12.

15. Morton, "New England Canaan," p. 36.

16. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 85; see also William Wood, New England's Prospect, ed. by Alden T. Vaughan (Amherst, 1977), p. 38; William

intricacies of the seasonal food cycle, these motivations remained largely beyond the comprehension of English observers.

In areas of life in which the natives' ways appeared even more foreign from their own familiar systems, colonists became even less likely to be able to accurately interpret what they saw. They universally portrayed the aboriginal distribution of labor as one in which the men enjoyed an "extraordinarily idle" existence, while the women lived "a most slavish life," doing all of the work and drudgery. To the English eye, the men only occupied themselves with hunting and fishing; their wives, however, carried "all their burdens, their children and the luggage besides" when on the move, "set their corne" and performed all of the agricultural labor from planting to harvest, gathered and prepared "much of their food and the fruites of the field," and had "all the household care lying upon them," in addition to countless other responsibilities.¹⁷

These descriptions reflect the English inability to comprehend a labor system which was so radically different from their own. The native distribution of labor was inherently tied to the aboriginal subsistence economy, and required contributions from both genders in a manner unparalleled in European society. Men contributed by hunting, an activity which naturally took them away from the domestic setting, while women supplied subsistence as the primary agriculturalists in the community. Rather than making them slaves, this responsibility reflected the position that females held in matrilineal or semi-matrilineal societies of the eastern woodlands, and Indian males recognized the value of their wives' labor, as indicated by their derisive reference to English women as "Lazie Squaes."¹⁸ Further, by nature, the males' labor scattered them away from the village sites, and therefore made them less likely to be observed by English

 Cronon, Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England (New York, 1983), pp. 49-51; Timothy Silver, A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in the South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800 (New York, 1990), pp. 59-64.

17. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 262; Higginson, "New England's Plantation," p. 13; "Winslow's Relation," p. 363; Roger Williams, A Key into the Language of America, ed. by John J. Teunisson and Evelyn J. Hinz (Detroit, 1973), p. 123; Christopher Levett, A Voyage into New England (London, 1628), reprinted in the Massachusetts Historical Society Collections III (1843): 179.

18. Thomas Lechford, "Plain Dealing" (1642), in Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, III (1843): 103.

visitors; on the other hand, since the females performed their primary tasks in and around the villages, their labors were more likely to be recorded. While the women appeared constantly busy with jobs generally done by men in the European society, the colonists saw Indian men in the villages, most often resting between expeditions, refurbishing their hunting supplies, or fishing, none of which represented a great expenditure of energy, and which branded them with the label of lazy by the colonists. Finally, by the seventeenth century, due to their reliance on domesticated livestock, middle class Englishmen considered hunting and fishing as recreational activities, not as essential elements of their livelihoods. The observers' criticisms of the native labor system, and particularly of the male part in it, resulted from the fact that they were in no position to understand the aboriginal subsistence economy, with the well-defined roles which made it work efficiently and satisfactorily.

Just as they misunderstood what they saw in native labor relationships, English writers also described political power structures, but evaluated them against the context of European government, which was not entirely a valid comparison. Daniel Gookin described native government as "generally monarchical."¹⁹ Numerous observers noted a type of hierarchy, consisting of sagamores, sachems, and other petty chiefs. While struggling to make sense of what appeared to be a chaotic system, they unwittingly left a clear image of the forces at work in the native power structure. "Their sachems cannot be all called kings," recorded John Smith, "but only some few of them, to whom the rest resort for protection and pay tribute unto them." "Once a year, the [petty chiefs] provoke the people to bestow much corn on the sachem," who expressed his thanks by "bestowing many gifts on them."²⁰ In an early encounter with Massassoit, Plymouth settlers witnessed a council meeting in which the chief "made a great speech . . . the meaning whereof was Was not he, Massassoit, commander of the country about him? Was not such a town his, and the people of it? And should they not bring their skins unto" the colonists, if he so commanded? To each question,

19. Daniel Gookin, "Historical Collections of the Indians in New England (1674)," in Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, I (1792): 154; see also "Winslow's Relation," pp. 360-362; and Higginson, "New England's Plantation," p. 12.

20. John Smith, The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Sumer Isles (London, 1624), p. 240; see also "Winslow's Relation," pp. 360-362.

the council assented.²¹ Such descriptions clearly indicate the existence of chiefdoms in aboriginal New England, in which hereditary chiefs maintained their power through a mixture of economic control, reciprocity, and charismatic appeal, which included the support of a council.²²

Not only the colonists' lack of understanding, but also their prejudice against Indian civilization, appears in accounts of native government. When they considered it "a matter of much wonderment to see how solidly and wisely these savage people did consider" weighty political matters,²³ observers revealed their own expectations and biases in relation to native ways. Colonists were unable to fully understand native government and society, however, by imposing their own standards, preconceptions, and judgments on what they witnessed.

Likewise, New Englanders were unable to grasp the full context of native diplomacy or the Indians' attraction to alliances with the new colonies. At one point, in discussing diplomacy with the colonists, Massassoit mentioned the French in Canada, "bidding [the English] not to suffer them to come to Narrohiganset," and he pledged his loyalty to King James.²⁴ Other sources reveal that the Wampanoags had a longstanding enmity toward the Narragansetts, which helps to explain Massassoit's willingness and even eagerness to enter a mutual pact with the Plymouth colonists, and to announce his allegiance to a ruler he had never seen. He wanted the English to use their influence and resources to discourage French assistance to the Wampanoag's natural enemies. John Smith noted that the natives of the Massachusetts Bay area experienced hostilities with the Pennobscots and other tribes of the northeast coast, in addition to

21. "Bradford's and Winslow's Journal," in Young, Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers, pp. 209-210; see also Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, pp. 162-163.

22. For a discussion of ranked-society chiefdoms, see Wilcolm Washburn, The Indian in America (New York, 1975), pp. 60-88; E. Randolph Turner, "An Archeological and Ethnohistorical Study on the Evolution of Rank Societies in the Virginia Coastal Plain," Ph.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1976, pp. 92-126; Marshall Sahlins, Tribesmen (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), p. 26.

23. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, pp. 162-163; see also John Winthrop, Winthrop's Journal, History of New England, 1630-1649, ed. by James K. Hosmer (New York, 1908), I: 186.

24. "Bradford's and Winslow's Journal," p. 210.

their belligerent encounters with the Narragansetts of the interior. Francis Higginson, at least, recognized that the local Indians valued the colonies as a source of "defence from their enemies, wherewith . . . before this plantation began, they were often indangered."²⁵ Most other colonists, however, their vision clouded by their own ethnocentrism and a desire to find naturally cooperative natives, believed that Massassoit acted out of a recognition of English superiority, rather than in reference to his own diplomatic needs and agenda.

Similarly, with reference to trade, the colonists exhibited an imperfect understanding of its role in the aboriginal economy. They acknowledged that prior to European contact, the natives traded "amongst themselves" items such as "corne, skins, coates, venison, [and] fish, etc.,"²⁶ but the observers never seem to have bothered to ask themselves *why*, in a land of such apparent plenty and with their seasonal adaptation to resources, the Indians bothered to trade with each other or how this barter system originated. John Smith hinted at the answer when he wrote that the native New Englanders "have trade with each other so farr as they have society on each others frontiers." The Indians had adapted to their own regional habitats, which varied with geographic setting, topography, ecology, and climate. Smith noted that southern New England produced "much plenty of corn," while "the furs Northward [were] much better and in much more plenty than southward."²⁷ Inhabitants of the colder, less densely populated northern reaches could hunt thicker herds of larger animals, producing meat and quality furs, than were present in southern New England, where the warmer climate encouraged proliferation of the agricultural production of corn, beans, and squash. Villages in the interior might have access to an abundance of chestnuts and other commodities of the forest, but not to the shellfish that natives along the coast could gather. This whole web of aboriginal trade was part of the subsistence system that allowed the natives a satisfactory existence in the region.

Many English chroniclers noted the Indians' willingness to trade for European items, but they interpreted this willingness merely as a sign of the natives' attraction to what the merchants

25. Higginson, "New England's Plantation," p. 13; Smith, Generall Historie, p. 215.

26. Williams, A Key into the Language of America, p. 215.

27. Smith, Generall Historie, p. 215; see also Cronon, Changes in the Land, pp. 92-93.

had to offer, or perhaps their recognition of European technological superiority. Johnson painted a simplistic picture of an early encounter between sailors and Indians along the coast, who fled in fear until the entrepreneurial Englishmen "made signes . . . that they might have trade with them." The cautious natives little by little drew nearer, attracted by "certain copper kettles" set out before them, and they became "much delighted with the sound and much more astonished to see [the vessels] would not break, being so thin." Anxious to possess these new items from the sailors, the Indians "brought them much beaver."²⁸ Such encounters surely occurred; it did not take native traders — or perhaps more accurately, their wives — long to recognize the benefits of copper kettles as compared to clay vessels, or the advantages of other items supplied by the English colonists. But Englishmen like Johnson did not comprehend the full complexity of the native economic system, if they recognized its existence at all, or the role that luxury trade items played in it.

Morton recorded that even before Massassoit fully understood the reasons for the English arrival in Massachusetts, he was "desirous to purchase their friendship," in order to establish a commercial relationship, "which he conceived would be very advantageous to him."²⁹ Colonists, however, did not understand why trade was so advantageous to Massassoit and other sachems or werowances of the region, because they did not understand the sociopolitical structure of the aboriginal world. Although political concentration and complexity varied a great deal among New England tribal groups, particularly in comparison with other sedentary or semi-sedentary groups in other parts of eastern America, evidence indicates the existence of some degree of chiefdom structure. One measure of prestige, and therefore power, in ranked-society chiefdoms, was the ability to accumulate, display, and — most importantly — distribute wealth.³⁰ Chiefs

28. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 40.

29. Morton, "New England Canaan," p. 71.

30. For a discussion of ranked-society chiefdoms and the importance of trade, see Cronon, Changes in the Land, pp. 46, 59, 62, and 93-98; Washburn, Indian in America, pp. 60-88; Turner, "Rank Societies in the Virginia Coastal Plain," pp. 92-126; Stephen R. Potter, Commoners, Tribute, and Chiefs: The Development of Algonquian Culture in the Potomac Valley (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1993), pp. 14-20 and 168-170; Stephen R. Potter, "Early English Effects on Virginia Algonquian Exchange and Tribute in the Tidewater Potomac," in Peter H. Wood,

obtained their wealth in the forms of tribute collected from their subjects, and luxury items acquired through trade. Although hereditary, political power could be fleeting, dependent upon attracting loyalty through a combination of charisma, power, and prestige. Sachems like Massasoit had to hope to gain exclusive access to European trade items, to control the commerce and make it work to their advantage. Blue glass beads, copper kettles, and woven cloth were only advantageous to chiefs if they alone could obtain the items and then distribute them to favorites; the chief's acquisitions through trade would be meaningless, given the aboriginal context of gift-giving and status, if anyone could trade directly with the newcomers. In this light, Massasoit's eagerness to "purchase [the colonists'] friendship" makes perfect sense.

One other note needs to be made regarding trade. The colonists needed trade far more than did the Indians. The aboriginal economy was sufficient and satisfying to the natives prior to contact with the Europeans. They had survived for centuries with the system, and could have continued to do so. The items they obtained in the exchange were luxury items, but in the aboriginal context, not necessities. Copper kettles simply replaced clay pots, iron hatchets or knives did the same jobs as stone blades, and glass beads merely added another exotic luxury item to the native status system. In fact, the Indians often did not even employ trade items for their intended purposes, but rather to perform familiar functions for their new owners, as was evidenced all over eastern America by the natives' habit of transforming copper kettles or glass bottles into arrowheads, jewelry, or small tools. The colonists, on the other hand, driven by the motives of profit — or even mere survival — in the new environment, needed to trade for Indian corn, furs, or land. The native economy was sound in its own context; the colonies, conversely, had to create an economic base to justify and insure their existence. Indians did not *have* to participate in commerce with the colonists; but they *chose* to do so, and their choices were based more upon their own frame of reference than upon English colonial designs or presumed European superiority.

Perhaps in no other area did the colonists prove themselves unable to grasp the meanings and intricacies of native culture more than in religion. This fact is not surprising, given the Puritans' own emphasis on religion and their absolute

Gregory A. Waselkov, and M. Thomas Hatley, eds., Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1989), pp. 152-154.

confidence in their own exclusive brand of orthodoxy, but since spirituality was also central to Indian life, the misunderstanding represented a serious barrier between the two societies. Since New England Puritans felt the need to be aggressive with their beliefs, they wrote a great deal about aboriginal religion, but as Europeans in general equated Christianity with civilization, they were unable to recognize any value or integrity in the natives' system.

Many writers mistakenly assumed that the natives had no religion at all. Edward Johnson pronounced that regarding "religious observations, they were the most destitute of any people yet heard of."³¹ Other writers seemed somewhat confused by what they saw. Edward Winslow initially concluded that the natives were "a people without any religion or knowledge of God," but later admitted he had "erred . . . [for] they conceive of many divine powers," though he did not consider that this belief in "divine powers" fit the criteria of an integral religion. Likewise, after Morton stated that "these savages are found to be without religion," he noted that they were "not altogether without the knowledge of God"; he went on to further contradict his assertion against native religion by describing their cosmology and belief systems.³² Still, the differences between Christianity and what the Puritans observed in New England negated any recognition that aboriginal practices had any value or deserved any serious consideration.

Some colonists who realized that the natives believed in a higher order of spirituality also recorded the dualistic nature of Indian religion, but they hedged their descriptions with their own familiar context of Christianity. For instance, Puritan writers referred to the two spiritual forces — not entirely accurately — as representing "good" and "evil."³³ "Kiehtan," the good god, according to Winslow, "created the heavens, earth and sea and all creatures contained therein" and "dwelleth above in the heavens,

31. Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence*, p. 263.

32. Morton, "New England Canaan," p. 34; "Bradford's and Winslow's Journal," p. 233; "Winslow's Relation," p. 355.

33. See Higginson, "New England's Plantation," p. 13. Natives did not consider the two forces as good and evil, or right and wrong, in such strict terms as did the Christians. For a discussion, see the Iroquois creation myth, in James Axtell, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America: A Documentary History of the Sixes* (New York, 1981), pp. 173-179.

whither all good men go when they die."³⁴ While he correctly indicated the native belief in the immortality of the spirit, Winslow worded his account in terms that sounded amazingly like the Christian doctrine of heaven, salvation, and the afterlife of the soul.

Attempts to characterize the set of beliefs surrounding the other spiritual force proved even more problematic, and clearly reveal the biases which clouded the colonists' understanding of what they observed. Since the Indians constantly sought to appease the counter spirit, whom they feared would cause mischief in the world, Christian Englishmen mistook the aboriginal practices as devil worship, and the native spiritual leaders (powwows) as agents of the devil.³⁵ Again, these descriptions more accurately reflect the Christian concept of evil and the devil's place in Christian theology than the Indian belief in the duality of spiritual forces operating in the world. The Puritan accusation of devil worship made no sense in the aboriginal context because the natives had no concept of a being who filled the role of the devil in Christianity.

All areas of native life, from the choosing of names to invocations for the hunt, were tied into the spiritual system and this belief in cosmic forces. New England Indians attributed illness to the influences of the mystical world, rather than the physical world. Illness, they posited, resulted from a violation of some taboo or some other spiritual dysfunction. Therefore, shamans — religious leaders who were believed to possess particularly intense powers in bridging the gap between the natural and supernatural worlds — played the role of consultant and physician in the curing process, using their mystical influence to drive away the malevolent spirit causing the malady. This represents the native belief that shamans were not just intercessors between the people and their gods, pleading for a response, but that the shamans could actually manipulate the spirits to leave the victim's body, in somewhat of a cosmic struggle between the knowledge and powers of the shaman versus the resolve of the

34. "Winslow's Relation," p. 355.

35. Higginson, "New England's Plantation," p. 13; Morton, "New England Canaan," pp. 25 and 263; "Winslow's Relation," p. 357.

spirits.³⁶ Various colonists witnessed the practices involved in the healing processes, but due to their narrow frame of reference, they could not understand the meaning of what they saw. Focussing on their own interpretation of devil worship and the shaman's efforts to out-maneuver the malevolent spirits which were thought to be the cause of the illnesses, Puritan writers contended that the "duty of the powah is to be exercised principally in calling upon the devil and curing the diseases of the sick or wounded." Descriptions of the shamans' methods include "Charmes," "fierce countenance [and] antic and laborious gestures," all of which the English observers, naturally, found ridiculous.³⁷

Finally, in the context of religion, colonists misinterpreted the natives' intentions when some Indians exhibited an attraction to Christianity. For instance, when in 1633 the natives attributed much-needed rain to the intercession of Christian prayer, they supposedly "were much taken with the Englishmen's god." That same year, during an outbreak of smallpox, "Divers of them, in their sickness, confessed that the Englishmen's God was a good God, and that if they recovered, they would serve him."³⁸ Such reports, which the writers portrayed as confirmation that the natives accepted the superiority of Christianity, clearly were self-serving to the collective Puritan ego, and to their sense of mission in the wilderness. The accounts, however, show a complete lack of understanding of the syncretic nature of aboriginal religion.³⁹ When natives initially admitted a willingness to consider Christianity, they generally were doing so as an addition to their own set of beliefs, not as an exclusive replacement, as the English missionaries anticipated. Indians often spoke in terms of the power of the Christian God, such as in sending rain or ending an epidemic, incorporating that spiritual power into the whole complex of beings and forces in

 36. For a discussion of native religion and disease, see Axtell, Indian Peoples of Eastern America, pp. 171-173 and 190.

37. "Winslow's Relation," p. 357; Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 41.

38. Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, p. 87; Winthrop, Journal, I: 115.

39. For a discussion of the native syncretism, see James Axtell, Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America (New York, 1992), pp. 116-118; James P. Ronda, "We Are Well As We Are: An Indian Critique of Seventeenth-Century Christian Missions," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d series, XXXIV (1977): 66-82.

their cosmology. If the natives found a powerful manitou, or spiritual force, they would, by all means, adopt it for their own benefit, but not so rashly as to abandon the others which had served them and their ancestors well for centuries. Englishmen, however, expected complete native conversion, thus explaining their enthusiastic responses to early indications of native interest and their subsequent sense of betrayal when their expectations went unfulfilled.⁴⁰

The inability or unwillingness of New England writers to get beyond their preconceptions and biases led not only to incomplete or inaccurate representations of native culture, but also to stereotypical images, many of which have been long-lived. Most of them have been derogatory, resulting from the fact that Indians did not — and probably could not — live up to European expectations. Amidst all of the criticisms and pejorative characterizations, however, some writers like Thomas Morton inserted equally inaccurate images of the Indians as a people "guided only by the light of nature, [who] leade the more happy and freer life, being . . . so void of care, and they are so loving also, . . . [that] they pass away the time merrily."⁴¹ Fitting roughly with the European conception of the "Noble Savage," these images contributed to the construction of the counter-stereotype of native cultures somehow simpler and more idyllic than their technologically advanced counterparts, yet occupying a higher plane of existence, in spiritual terms. By putting Indian societies on a sort of a pedestal, this effort to characterize them proves just as damaging to a true understanding as do the negative stereotypes, because both make the natives seem less human, removing them from the real physical sphere in which they, as well as the colonists, acted. The vast generalizations, either positive or negative, do a disservice by making the Indians less believable as real people, who behaved according to real concerns, perceptions, expectations, needs, and desires; they made decisions

40. For example, see accusations of "Praying Indians" joining the enemy during King Philip's War during the 1670s. Daniel Gookin, An Historical Account of the Doings and Sufferings of the Christian Indians in New England in the Years 1675, 1676, 1677 (originally published in 1836; reprint, New York, 1972), pp. 515 and 523; [Nathaniel Saltonstall], "The Present State of New-England With Respect to the Indian War, 1675," in Charles H. Lincoln, ed., Narratives of the Indian Wars, 1675-1699 (New York, 1913), p. 49; "Winthrop Papers," Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, XLI (1871): 106.

41. Morton, "New England Canaan," p. 40.

which affected the course of events and thereby contributed in a human way to the human story of history. The fact that Europeans could not fully understand those human motives, and perhaps could not be expected to have done so, does not diminish the reality of their existence.

English accounts of native life and culture in New England provide a variety of information on different levels. In describing what they observed, the colonists revealed a great deal about themselves and the cultural baggage they carried with them to North America. That much seems obvious. When it comes to analyzing the reflections they left of the Indians, the question becomes more problematic. Each observation must be examined in a comparative fashion to determine just what the chroniclers really saw, how deeply they understood what they witnessed, and how much they could have been expected to comprehend, given the human limitations of their own frame of reference. Only a portion of the descriptions of Indian practices can be taken at face value, but all of them are valuable for what they reveal about Puritan society, and, more importantly, for the clues they provide about the native culture, when interpreted through the perspective of ethnohistory.