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THE INDIANS OF EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS, 1620-1645

By

Frederick F. Harling

There have been many writings about the American Indian, but most have been simple descriptions of the Indian long after his original culture and society had undergone a great deal of change. The Indians of Eastern Massachusetts were called the Algonquin Indians. This essay is the result of an examination of all of the primary historical sources available pertaining to the Algonquin before their contact with Europeans altered and eroded, forever, their unique culture.

The sources relating to the early Massachusetts Indians are few. First, there was no Indian alphabet and therefore no written language until John Eliot began his work in the mid 1640s. Secondly, there was little written by the Europeans about the Indians; they wrote only about what they found troublesome in Indian behavior.

It was early recognized that the Algonquin Indians could be identified in five separate tribes. The Northern area was occupied by the Alberginians, who were considered

the most handsome and healthy of the natives.¹ Roaming along the coast to the East were the Tarrentines, who were reportedly "wise, lofty spirited, constant in friendship with one another; true to their promise, and more industrious than many others."² To the South prowled the Pequots, who were a "stately, warlike people, . . . just and equal in their dealings; not treacherous in their dealings either with their countrymen or the English."³ The closest neighbors to the Pequots were the Narragansetts, who were the most industrious, populous and rich of all the tribes. The Narragansetts and their sachem, or chief, Uncass, were satisfied to see European justice meted out to Europeans who had violated Indian rights, but there is no evidence that the opposite was accepted by the Europeans.⁴ The consistent attitude of the English was to "educate" the Indian until he craved English justice.⁵

¹William Wood, New England Prospect (London, 1634), pp. 50-65.

²Ibid., p. 61.

³Ibid., p. 63.

⁴Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England, I, 345.

⁵Ibid., p. 96.

In the Western area lived the Mohawk tribe. This was apparently the only tribe that aroused terror. They were known "to burn homes, slay men and ravish women."⁶ According to reports, an enemy captive was at first allowed to rest and to eat the very best food until he felt good and began to get fat. Then the Mohawks literally ate their enemies alive by the inch. William Wood described their method in 1634: "Yea very caniballs they were, sometimes eating on a man one part after another before his face, and while yet living." He declared that "the very name Mohawk wouldst strike the heart of a poore Alberginian dead, were there not hope at hand of releefe from English to succour them."⁷ The Mohawks were notorious for making a "delicious monstrous dish of their enemy."⁸ After they had eaten enough flesh from the leg bones of their enemies, they strung their enemies together through the leg bones like a string of human beads. Prisoners who had escaped the Mohawks often displayed their deep scars to the English. Tales of Mohawk savagery know no end. It is said that they roasted the heads of their

⁶Wood, New England Prospect, p. 57.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Roger Williams, A Key to the Indian Language (London, 1634), p. 214.

victims and then ate the insides. For a slower death, they are supposed to have beaten men to death with their own flesh. The tales become so grim, it often sounds like a competition to tell the most brutal and shocking story. Unfortunately, there is no Mohawk literature to give another point of view. It appears, then, that with the exception of the Mohawks, most tribes of Eastern Massachusetts seem to have been peaceful.⁹

Although the Algonquin tribes could be distinguished from one another, they had a great deal in common. They shared a large body of common skills, practices and cultural heritage. According to the greatest and only authority on the Algonquin language, John Eliot, there was very little variation in the dialects of the various tribes.¹⁰ Indians who lived as far apart as New York and Maine could speak with one another.

Just as there was a common language, there was also a common religion. Some English observers felt that the Indian beliefs of a Creation and of the immortality of the soul did not constitute any religion at all,¹¹ but other observers such as the Reverend Cotton Mather

⁹The Pequot War of 1637 and King Philip's War of 1675 were caused by the encroachments of the colonists.

¹⁰F. J. Powicke, "Eliot Baxter Correspondence," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, XV.

¹¹Thomas Morton, New England Canaan (Amsterdam, 1637), p. 27.

described in detail the Indian religion. "They believe that there are many gods, who made and own the several nations of the earth; of which a certain great God in the southwest regions of Heaven bears the greatest figure. They believe that every remarkable creature has a peculiar God within it, or about it." In addition, "when any good or ill happens to them, there is the favor or anger of that God expressed in it; and hence as in a time of calamity, they keep a dance, or a day of extravagant ridiculous devotions to their God, so in a time of prosperity they likewise have a feast wherein they also make presents to one another. Finally, they believe that their chief God Kautantowit, made a man and a woman of a tree, which were the foundations of all mankind; and that we all have in us immortal souls, which if we were godly, shall go to a splendid entertainment with Kautantowit, but otherwise must wander about it in restless horror forever."¹²

The description of the Algonquin religion with a creation story, a god, a moral law, and a heaven and a hell are familiar themes to anyone who has even the

¹² Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana (London, 1702), p. 505.

slightest notions about comparative world religions. Another religious practice of the Indians described by the Puritans is devil worship. How much of this is literal truth and how much is fantasy is difficult to determine. During time of war, it was reported that the Indians learned that it was difficult to make a sudden attack on settlements, due to the "sad yelling" of the colonists' dogs. As a result, it was reported that "they sacrificed a dog to the devil; after which no English dog would bark at an Indian for divers months ensuing."¹³

Indian-Devil relationships were relatively easy for the Puritan observers to understand, but it was not always easy for the colonists to understand the Indian attitude towards topless, bare-breasted native women who made loud crunching noises when they unconsciously crushed their body lice between their teeth. The strict Puritans legislated against such practices by the happy native women.¹⁴

There was an even greater dissimilarity between Indian and Puritan marriage customs. According to Thomas Morton,

¹³ Ibid., p. 506.

¹⁴ Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., Records of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay in New England (Boston, 1853-1856), I, 178.

"The women of this country, are not suffered to be sued for procreation, until ripeness of their age: at which time they wear a red cap. They wear this for twelve months to inform all the young braves that they are marriageable. And then it is the custom of their sachems of Lords of the territories to have the first Say or maidenhead of the females."¹⁵ Instead of the English custom of protecting a pregnant woman, the Indian squaw would continue with her usual work until the child was born. "Yea, when they are great as can be, yet in that case they neither forbear labour, nor travale, I have seen them in that plight with burdens on their backs enough to load a horse, yet doe they not miscarry, but have a faire delivery. . . and the women very lusty after delivery."¹⁶ Almost immediately after delivery, the squaw would resume her usual rugged chores. Later, they carried their babies in papoose rigs that at least one English observer believed superior to the English cradle.¹⁷

Indians did not have European money, but in its place they used Wampum. To a non-Indian, Wampum appeared to be

¹⁵Morton, New England Canaan, p. 27.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁷Ibid.

merely a collection of beads and shells, but to the Indian, it was a very identifiable medium of exchange that could not be counterfeited. Algonquin pottery likewise had a unique characteristic and was of high quality. Their pots were found to be "earthware and thin, but effecient."¹⁸ Another remarkable Indian skill was the keen development of the Indian senses. Their senses of sight, scent, and hearing were artfully developed in scouting and hunting, and the Europeans marvelled at this development. It was reputed that an Algonquin could discern a Spaniard from a Frenchman by the scent of a hand.¹⁹

Though there were European-Indian differences, there were also a few values that they held in common. Personal reputation was held in high esteem by both peoples. Both admired intense, personal bravery. Though there were a few of these mutual values, essentially their ways of life were diverse. By the 1630s, many of the trade relationships established with the Indians had become illegal.²⁰ Gold, silver, guns, liquor, land, sailing equipment and many other articles were added to the lists as the mutual

¹⁸Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 48.

²⁰Shurtless, RGCMBNE, I, 330.

mistrust grew. The Pequot War of 1637 and the King Philip War of 1675 mirrored this mistrust. But more than that, they were ominous portents for the future of all Indian-White relationships. The seeds of "manifest destiny" had already been planted with the advent of the first colonists. Sheer numbers and aggressiveness of the Europeans grew, until it was inevitable that the Algonquin way of life and culture would be exterminated forever.