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Native People in Seventeenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts I: Names and Language

Welcome to “Native People in Seventeenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts I: Names and Language” a lecture for this course. We’ll look at what names are appropriate to use for the Native people of seventeenth-century eastern Massachusetts and what language many of them spoke. These issues speak to questions around identity and authenticity: what is the role of a people’s language in understanding them? How important is the name or descriptor that we use for a people? How can we understand a people from their own perspective, and to what degree is this possible? We will not be able to answer all these questions completely, but this lecture will touch on some of them. In this lecture first I’ll discuss what names we might use for Native people of seventeenth-century eastern Massachusetts and then I’ll discuss the Massachusett language. The learning goals are you to be able to identify some considerations around what name to use for indigenous people in seventeenth-century Massachusetts and to evaluate the impact of the Massachusett language writing system.

First, what name should we use for Native people in seventeenth-century eastern Massachusetts? Is the word “Native” a reasonable term to use, what did seventeenth-century Native people call themselves, and how should we refer to different groups of seventeenth-century Native people?¹ Several scholars have discussed this topic but I will focus on what Kathleen Bragdon and Christopher Strobel have said. Bragdon, an anthropologist, notes that we might use the indigenous term “Ninnimisinuok” for Native people in seventeenth-century Massachusetts (xi). This term is derived from the Narragansett word *Ninnimissinnûwock*, which basically means “people.” She indicates that this term might be more consistent with how some Native people might have thought of themselves, which is to say, as a people with some similarities and connections. While Ninnimisinuok indicates some sense of shared identity amongst early Native people in New England, Bragdon notes the term does not imply that Native people groups in New England were the same. In terms of how to call specific groups of Native people, Bragdon didn’t particularly advocate for using names of tribes since some of these might have been given by non-Natives, like Europeans (xi). Another scholar, Christopher Strobel, a historian, has referred to the different Native people living in early New England as “People of the Dawnland.” He writes that the Abenaki Indians called parts of New England “dawnland” because as an eastern part of North America, New England was seen as one of the first places the sun’s rays hit as it rose (1-2). Some Native people called the land of the Americas “Turtle Island” and the area of what is roughly New England was a kind of “dawnland” within Turtle Island (Strobel 1-2). Although Bragdon doesn’t suggest tribal names, for this lecture I will use some. Naming specific tribes allow us to describe certain seventeenth-century Native individuals more closely. Furthermore, some of the tribal names that I will use seem to be ones that seventeenth-century Native people did call themselves. There were different Native tribes, nations, or groups in the state of Massachusetts, including the Wampanoag, the Nipmuc, the Massachusett, and the Nauset. The Wampanoag are more like an entire nation and there are individual tribes within it,

¹ I am focusing on names for the seventeenth-century Native people in Massachusetts, and not Native people today. However, for more discussion on how to call Native people in the USA from different tribes today, one resource is “The Impact of Words and Tips for Using Appropriate Terminology: Am I Using the Right Word?” from the National Museum of the American Indian (<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/impact-words-tips#:~:text=American%20Indian%2C%20Indian%2C%20Native%20American,group%20which%20term%20they%20prefer.>).

like the Pokanoket Wampanoag.² In this lecture, I'll use either "Native," since this term is widely used among scholars today, or "People of the Dawnland" to refer to the seventeenth-century Native people of eastern Massachusetts.

Now let's move on to language. What language did seventeenth-century Native people in eastern Massachusetts speak? Different tribes spoke different languages, but I will focus on the language of the Wampanoag and Massachusett people; the language is generally also called Wampanoag or Massachusett; one scholar refers to it as Massachusett-Coweset and sees it as part of a distinctive Southern New England Algonquian group of languages (Costa 81).³ I'll refer to the language as either "Wampanoag" or "Massachusett" in this lecture. Wampanoag is part of the Algonquian language group. The Algonquian language group contains a large number of Native languages including those spoken along the east coast of the US down to the Carolinas, those Native languages in northeast Canada, as well as other places in the US (Filice; "Algonquian"). It definitely doesn't contain all Native languages spoken in the USA; for example, the Navajo language is a major language that is not part of this language group. The Massachusett language happens to have a large body of written work. That's because John Eliot, an English missionary, assisted in developing a Massachusett writing system after learning the Massachusett language from Massachusett people and working with them. He matched Massachusett sounds to letters of the Latin alphabet to develop the writing system. Eliot worked not just with Massachusett people, but also with other groups like the Nipmuc. With the writing system that he helped to develop, Massachusett sentences could be recorded using a written Latin alphabet.⁴ A number of documents written in Massachusett still survive, including notes in Bibles and letters. They allow us to hear more voices of Massachusett people from the past.

Several translations of the Bible into Massachusett were made, into which Native people wrote various notes and statements in the written Massachusett language.⁵ Scholars call these writings "marginalia." One Native person wrote, "This chapter I read, the first of Nahum," and others practiced writing their names, including "Josep Jethdro" (Bragdon and Goddard 379).⁶ I put the Massachusett language version, which I do not know how to pronounce unfortunately, in the footnotes of the lecture transcript so that you can see the original language. There are also some letters and other documents in the Wampanoag language. We'll look at one example: a letter from Zachary Hossueit in Martha's Vineyard to Solomon Priant in Mashpee; Hossueit and Priant were both ministers (Bragdon and Goddard 360). This letter is from 1766, which is a little after the period we are looking at, but it contains information from a more personal viewpoint and is not some kind of formal deed and record, so I thought it could be easier to access for learners in the course. Hossueit starts his letter: "To you my brother Solomon Priant of

² How do Native people in current-day New England call themselves? I looked at two Wampanoag tribe websites. The seventeenth-century Wampanoag are a Native nation that lived mainly in southeastern Massachusetts. The current-day Mashpee Wampanoag call themselves the "Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe" and state they are also known as "People of the First Light" (<https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/>). "People of the First Light" has a similar meaning to "People of the Dawnland," so perhaps these are related. Another tribe in the Wampanoag nation, that historically was located in Aquinnah, Massachusetts, describe themselves as "Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah."

³ The Southern New England Algonquian language group includes languages which were previously spoken in what is now parts of Rhode Island, Connecticut, Long Island, and most of Massachusetts

⁴ After not being spoken for a period of time, the Wampanoag language was revitalized in the 1990s and is being spoken today. Jessie "Little Doe" Baird spearheaded this effort and founded the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project. The Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project website is wlrp.org.

⁵ The Massachusett language Bible was the first Bible printed in British North America—in fact, a Nipmuc printer, known as James Printer or Wowaus, assisted the printing house in printing it.

⁶ The text in Massachusett is "yunuh Chabter nuttagettamunah chabder nahun negone."

Mashpee, Minister, and also all the congregation. Remember aspe [unclear] I have love for all of you in the name of our God Jehovah and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Bragdon and Goddard 361).⁷ From this opening, we can tell that Hossueit is addressing Priant and the people that Priant pastors. Hossueit states that he loves Priant and the congregants. He’s writing in a religious context since he’s a pastor of a Christian church speaking to another pastor, so he uses religious language, citing Jehovah and Christ. At the end of the letter, Hossueit writes, “I Zachary Hossueit, your loving brother, I shrink from (?) offending in any teaching or in anything against you” (Bragdon and Goddard 140).⁸ Hossueit maintains his love and respect for Priant, hoping he does not displease him. Reading the Massachusetts language can give us a deeper sense of the Massachusetts past, possibly, as we are hearing from a person in a language that was native to them. For example, Zachary Hossueit was able to express himself in the language that was part of his upbringing and his culture when he was writing his letter. Yet, the fact that the writing system was introduced by an outsider, an English missionary, might be seen as intrusive and inauthentic. How, then, are we to think about written Massachusetts—as a foreign and external imposition or an internally accepted and developed method of communication? This is a question that you can discuss in the forums.

I have tried to give you a few snippets from Massachusetts language documents just now, but please check out Kathleen Bragdon and Ives Goddard’s book *Native Writing in Massachusetts* for a really informative and descriptive collection of Massachusetts-language documents. In this lecture I’ve focused on two issues, what term or name to call Native people or distinct groups of Native people in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, as well as the Massachusetts or Wampanoag language. I’ve brought up the terms Ninnimissinuok, Native, and “People of the Dawnland” as possible terms. I also brought up another name for the land of North America, turtle island. In discussing the Massachusetts language I told about how the written system developed, and provided some examples from writings in Massachusetts. The discussion questions ask you to examine Bragdon’s ideas in more detail and consider the impact of the written Massachusetts language on both Native and English people. Happy discussing.

Discussion question 1: It doesn’t seem as if many scholars have taken up Bragdon’s suggestion of using “Ninnimissinuok” for Native people in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Here is Bragdon writing about this term (she starts her book with this discussion): “In this book I portray the indigenous people of the region now called southern New England as they lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These people include the Pawtucket, Massachusetts, Nipmuck, Pocumtuck, Narragansett, Pokanoket, Niantic, Mohegan and Pequot, as well as the peoples of western Connecticut and Long Island (Map 1). My goal is to provide an account that is, as far as possible, consistent with the Native point of view and with Native voice. Hence, I often make use of the indigenous term, Ninnimissinuok, to refer to the people of this region. This term, a variation of the Narragansett word *Ninnimissinnûwock*, which means roughly ‘people,’ connotes familiarity and shared identity (Williams 1936:A3; Trumbull 1903:306), and thus avoids not only the awkwardness and inaccuracy of the use of multiple ‘tribal’ labels, but also

⁷ The text in Massachusetts is “en ken nemat Solomon Priant Mespeh nohtompeontog & wonk wame Moewehkomonk mehquatammook aspe nuttahtom wammaasoeonk en wame kennau ut oowesueonkanit kummantoomun Jehovah & Lord Jesus Christ”

⁸ The text in Massachusetts is “Nen Zachary Hossueit wommonnae kemmattoo nussohquannum wuttam hoowon nane en koohkooteomehkonnat asuh nanne chaquassinnit en kennau.”

the troublesome fact that these names were sometimes tags applied to the inhabitants of this region by others, including non-Natives” (xi).

What do you think are the advantages or disadvantages of using “Ninnimisinuok”? Do you have any thoughts about why scholars might *not* have taken up this term? What significance do you think the question of what term to use to describe seventeenth-century Massachusetts indigenous people has?

Discussion question 2: Some scholars think of literacy or a writing system as a tool of colonialism. Jill Lepore writes about a Native person in seventeenth-century Massachusetts who learned how to read, “Literacy, however, was a special kind of marker, one that branded its possessor, perhaps most especially in his own eyes, as an Indian who had spent years and years with the English; his very ‘Indianness’ was thus called into question” and earlier she states, “Learning to read and write—and especially learning to read and write English—were among the very last steps on the path to cultural conversion” (498). What is your response to this? To what extent do you think literacy for Massachusetts, Wampanoag, and other Native people was a way of becoming more “English”? Do you think that literacy was ever a way of becoming more “Native”? (you may not have enough historical information to make any conclusions, but you can do extra research, or suggest initial thoughts you have on this). How do you think having a written Massachusetts language might have affected both the early Native and English people? What language group is Wampanoag a part of, and how does the fact that there are several written documents in Massachusetts affect what we know about Native history today? If you can, check out the Bragdon and Goddard book that compiles Native writings in Massachusetts and read some of the documents!

Works Cited and Additional Readings

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