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Native People of Seventeenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts II: Weetamoo and the Praying Indians

Welcome to the lecture “Native People of Seventeenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts II: Weetamoo and the Praying Indians”! In this lecture I’ll continue the discussion from the lecture “Native People of Seventeenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts I: Naming and Language.” Who were some key Native people in seventeenth-century eastern Massachusetts? What did they do and what was their impact? I’ve chosen two Native groups/individuals for us to focus on in detail in this lecture. One of these is Weetamoo, a sachem of the Wampanoag and the other is the Praying Indians. These two contrast in various ways but both have an important role in early New England history. The learning goals are for you to be able to identify Weetamoo’s role in King Philip’s War and describe features of the Praying Indians.

Let’s look at Weetamoo. She was one of the leaders of the Pocasset Wampanoag in the seventeenth-century; the Pocasset Wampanoag were a specific nation in the larger Wampanoag group (Martino-Trutor 37). She was a sachem, which is basically a leader. She’s known for her role in King Philip’s War, a conflict involving English colonists, Wampanoag, Narragansett, and other Native people. In this conflict the English fought against Wampanoag people who were led by King Philip, a Wampanoag sachem. King Philip was also known as Metacomet, but he took on this English title at some point after encountering the English. The English attacked the Narragansetts, and they also joined the war, fighting with King Philip. However, the Mohegans, and other Native groups fought for the English. One of the immediate triggers of the war was when an English jury condemned three Native men to death for the murder of another Native person, who was apparently a Christian (Lepore, “Dead Men” 483-4). This led to skirmishes and full-on fighting. Weetamoo joined King Philip in fighting against the English; she was King Philip’s sister-in-law since her husband was his brother, although she remarried after her husband died before the war (Martino-Trutor 43). Weetamoo commanded several troops; one Englishperson at the time estimated that she commanded about 300 men (Martino-Trutor 44). She also helped to develop and maintain connections between different groups who supported King Philip (Martino-Trutor 37-8). While it was unusual that a woman should become governmental and military leader, one scholar argues that this should not be too surprising, in either the Native or the English context. She shows how Queen Elizabeth and other English female monarchs are described as legitimate authorities and leaders, as “princes” (Martino-Trutor 39). This scholar also points out how some Native groups in New England valued familial inheritance in such a way that it outweighed a factor like gender in determining a woman’s position (Bragdon qtd in Martino-Trutor 40). Weetamoo is also described by an English writer (Nathaniel Saltonstall) as like a “prince” (Martino-Trutor 39). Weetamoo has also been written about in a narrative by Mary Rowlandson, an Englishwoman who was held as a captive by Native people during an attack. Rowlandson lived with Weetamoo for some time and served her while she was in captivity. Weetamoo died trying to escape the English towards the end of the war and her death probably indicated to some that the tide was turning for the English troops to be able to win the war (Martino-Trutor 49-50; 37). Weetamoo appears to have defied some societal expectations to become a powerful and accepted Wampanoag woman leader, guarding her land from the English in King Philip’s War.

Now, let’s look at the “Praying Indians,” who contrast a little with Weetamoo. They have a bit of a complex position in King Philip’s War. They could be thought of as allies to the

English since many supported the English, something that colonial writer Daniel Gookin highlights repeatedly in his sympathetic depiction of the Praying Indians (Breen 4-5). However, both English and other Native people seemed to have treated the Praying Indians with some suspicion about their loyalties. Tragically, many of them died when forcibly removed to an island in Boston Harbor, under a Puritan court decree, during the war (Bross and Wyss 106; Gookin). The “Praying Indians” were considered Christian Indians—those indigenous people in Massachusetts who apparently converted to Christianity. Many Praying Indians were from the Massachusett, Wampanoag, or Nipmuck tribes. For example, Massachusett people under the sachemship of Waban apparently converted to Christianity when Waban himself listened to John Eliot, a missionary, preaching (“Our History”; Gray 81, 85-6). Some of the Praying Indians’ testimonies have been recorded in the tracts that John Eliot wrote about missionary efforts in the region. From such accounts, we can see that their testimonies grapple with issues of the Christian faith in an introspective and thoughtful way. These accounts show that they considered what the Bible said carefully. One man named Monequassun, a school teacher, made a confession on a fast day before an assembly (Eliot et al. 16). He said, “Again hearing that word, *that the blind man called after Christ, saying, thou Son of David have mercy on me; Christ asked him what he would have him do, he said, Lord open my eyes; and presently Christ gave him sight, and he followed Christ: then again my heart was troubled, for I thought I still believe not, because I do not follow Christ, nor hath he yet opened mine eyes...: then I prayed to Christ to open mine eyes, that I might see what to do, because I am blind and cannot see how to follow Christ, and do what he commandeth, and I prayed to Christ, Teach me Lord what to do, and to do what thou sayest...*” Monequassun assesses his own salvation and whether he truly follows Jesus. He seems intrigued by this story of Christ but is troubled by a sense of his own sinfulness. It is not too dissimilar from other English Puritans’ testimonies about their spiritual journeys.

Eliot compiled narratives like these for several tracts. In this tract which contains Monequassun’s testimony, Eliot included the confessions several Native people made earlier in their lives, as well as the confessions made for a special assembly that was called. Since Eliot learned the Massachusett language, it seems that the testimonies were made in Massachusett and recorded and translated by him. Richard Mather, who wrote a letter to the reader prefacing the text, addressed the issue of how to trust that Eliot’s transcription was genuine and accurate, writing, “But how shall we know that the Confessions here related, being spoken in their tongue, were indeed uttered by them in such words, as have the same signification and meaning with these that are here expressed, for we have only the testimony of one man [John Eliot] to assure us of it?” (numbering of publisher, Eliot et al. 27-8). Mather responds to this question by telling us how Eliot had wanted other translators on the day the confessions were uttered but couldn’t get someone else to come, citing that Eliot’s faithfulness is generally known amongst people in the area, and finally noting the public nature of the work. What do you think? Can we take Monequassun’s account to be accurate, and how should we interpret it?

Many of the “Praying Indians” lived in towns that had been especially designated for them by the English. There were seven including: Wamesit, Nashobah, Okkokonimesit, also known as Marlborough, Hassannamesit, Makunkokoag, Natick, and Punkapog (Pakomit) (Gookin). Many of the Praying Indians also fought with the British in King Philip’s War. One Praying Indian, James Quanapohit, served as a spy in Indian camps for the British during the war (Gookin). However, various tensions that spilled over led to many of them being forcibly removed to Deer Island in Boston Harbor in 1675 and exposed to very harsh conditions that led

to deaths (Gookin). People like John Eliot and Daniel Gookin disagreed with the governing body's decision and tried to aid the Praying Indians, but they weren't effective.

In this lecture I've presented two different figures or groups, Weetamoo and the Praying Indians, including a man named Monequassun. Weetamoo was a powerful female Wampanoag leader who opposed the English in King Philip's War. The Praying Indians are people who learned about and engaged with Christianity, apparently taking on this faith themselves. Many of them fought for the English in King Philip's War. Weetamoo and Monequassun seem to have contrasting identities in terms of their perception of and interactions with the English; their gender and sex; and perhaps general beliefs, yet they were both Native people in the same area of Massachusetts. The discussion questions ask you to learn about and reflect more on these people, understanding who they were and considering how to understand their identities.

Discussion question 1:

Describe Weetamoo's role in King Philip's War. Do you think it was unusual that she was a female political leader? Gina Martino-Trutor cites Englishperson Nathaniel Saltonstall writing that King Philip asked Weetamoo first about joining him to attack the English, before asking other leaders because she was "as potent a prince as any round about her, and hath as much corn, land, and men at her command" (Saltonstall qtd in Martino-Trutor 44). What do you make of this quote and its wording? What does it and its context reveal to you?

Discussion question 2:

Look at one of the testimonies from the Eliot tracts. You can find several tracts, including *Tears of Repentance*, on this page: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo?cginame=text-idx;id=navbarbrowserlink;key=author;page=browse;value=el>.¹ (This link brings you to *Tears of Repentance*: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A84357.0001.001/1:6?rgn=div1;view=toc>). There is a lot of prefatory material which is optional for you to read but the confessions themselves are found largely after this material. Choose a testimony/confession and read all of it. What is interesting to you? What is the speaker grappling with and what is distinctive to you about how they grapple with it? What do you think could be lost in translation, if anything is? From what you know about the Puritans, how might the person's beliefs compare to other English Puritans'?

¹ The names of the tracts we refer to as the "Eliot Indian Tracts" are: *New England's First Fruits* (1643); *The Day-Breaking if not The Sun-Rising of the Gospel, With the Indians in New England* (1647); *The Clear Sun-shine of the Gospel Breaking Forth Upon the Indians in New-England* (1648); *The Glorious Progresse of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New England* (1649); *The Light Appearing more and more towards the perfect Day* (1651); *Strength out of Weaknesse* (1652); *Tears of Repentance: Or, A further Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst the Indians in New-England* (1653); *A Late and Further Manifestation of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst the Indians in New-England* (1655); *A Further Accompt of the Progresse of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New England* (1659); *A Further Account of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst the Indians in New-England* (1660); *A Brief Narrative of the Progresse of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New England* (1671).

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