

Random Musings following Session One

Many thanks to everyone who participated in the polls, and to those who asked questions in "Chat"...

Here are some follow-up thoughts I had, some prompted by the questions, some just things I want to share.

A reminder: **Take everything with a grain of salt.** There are multiple explanations for everything it seems, and probably not all of them are totally right or totally wrong. My interpretations are a synthesis of all that I have read and heard.

Timeline Perspective

Keep in mind that the period we will later talk about, surrounding the events in Indiantown, were centered on the year 1756 (plus or minus 25 years or so). That does seem like a long time ago to us (and it was!). But an equal passage of time had occurred before that to bring us back to 1492.

There was already a rich history of events and cultural shifts that had been underway in the Americas during the more than 200 years before the first English colonists arrived in the Berkshires.

Abenaki Language

As I mentioned, I am studying the Abenaki language. More precisely, it is the Western Abenaki dialect, one of a large group of Algonkian languages. [The difference between a language and a dialect is, according to linguist lore: "A language is a dialect with an army."]

Algonkin is the name of the people, Algonkian means "of the Algonkins" These spellings more accurately reflects the pronunciation of the name than does the spelling "Algonquin," which is not embraced by many Algonkins.

This is another (minor) example of exonym (a name given from the outside) versus endonym (a name taken by the person[s] in question).

I call myself Michael, so this is my endonym. Some of m friends and family who knew me 50+ years ago still call me "Mike" which was my exonym for most of my childhood. And that's okay with me. I didn't decide that I preferred Michael until I was about 20 years old.

I also get called Mike occasionally by people I meet these days, and I don't

object, but sometimes it doesn't register that folks are speaking to me if they use that exonym, which now sounds strange to me.

One exonym that does rankle me is being called a "person with autism" – I identify as an autistic person (my endonym), and find being accused of "having" autism to be demeaning. But I digress.

History

History, I've come to realize, is not just a series of facts. Rather, history, as we have come to know it, is a collection of opinions. I have, late in life, realized that there are multiple realities. When I was young (i.e. before age 60), I thought I had a monopoly on reality, and anyone who disagreed with my version of events must, by definition, be wrong.

This led to a lot of rancor in my personal dealings, and, I now believe, is an autistic trait (believing oneself to be right all the time about everything) that takes some effort to overcome (or at least it did for me).

Language – Lost in Translation?

My study of the (Western) Abenaki language/dialect is part of my efforts to learn more about Algonkian culture. I have very little expectation that I will become fluent in the language. It is also a bridge for me to the other Algonkian dialects, especially Mahican. From what I have learned so far, there are some significant differences in vocabularies and pronunciations among the various dialects, but their similarities (especially in grammatical structure) enable a speaker of one to understand the others without too much difficulty. Meanwhile, I am able to gain some insights into customs, such as place-naming, that I would otherwise not be able to understand.

The early European colonists often heard things wrong. Casco Bay in Maine is evidently an example of that; the original Abenaki name seems to have been "Azesko" which was heard as Casco. The Abenaki word means "muddy" and was a description of the bay. Many (if not most) Algonkian place-names were like that (descriptive). Nowadays, "Casco" is sometimes incorrectly translated as "Heron" since the Abenaki word for heron is "Kasko" (not to be confused with Costco).

An example of place-naming:

Pita = very or double or between or layer [as in the layer of water between two sheets of ice] (depending on context)

Bagw or Bagok = Lake

Pitabagok or Pitawbagw (there may be other spellings) means “Double Lake” or “Lake Between” and is the name of what are also called Lake Champlain and Lake George. Pitabagok (which seems to be the most commonly-used name) might also be a corruption of the plural of Pitawbagw, which would be Pitawbagwak.

Double Lake(s) would indicate the natives thought of the two lakes as one, and the Between might refer to the lakes being between the Adirondack Mountains and the Green Mountains. In any case, that was what they called the two lakes.

Another example of the word (or prefix) Pita:

Jesse Bruchac, my Abenaki language teacher (and a leader in its revitalization efforts), responded to a couple of things I had sent his way.

*Pita io wligen nid8ba! [Very that is good my friend!]
Wliwni for sharing with me and for your kolaloka!*

Wliwni [oo-lee-oo-nee] = thank you (it's all good)
nid8ba [knee dome bah] = my friend; the “ni” prefix means “my” and “your friend” would be kid8ba
kolaloka = good work

Notice the word order is not the same as in English, but the meaning is clear. The “wli” [oo-lee] in wliwni and wligen is “good” – so OLLI means “good” in Abenaki!

I've learned enough about the Abenaki language (and I've not learned a lot) to know that, while there are very definite grammatical structures, as in English (and I'm sure in every other language), there are exceptions. In English, we drop syllables all the time without thinking about it. **Don't** we? In French (the only other language of which I have much comprehension) similar things happen all the time as well. “Il n'y a pas de quoi.” (meaning “you're welcome” – literally “there is nothing of which” [to thank me for]) is often uttered as “pod qwa”...

The Abenaki expression is similar: “8da kagwi” [Ôda kagwi] – literally “Not something” – the “8” or “Ô” indicates a nasal sound, like the “un” in skunk. The number 8 is used for convenience on keyboards that don't have the “O” with a circumflex.

Some contractions in English have become so common that their origins are barely perceived (if at all). “Of the clock” was a common expression 300 years ago, but I wonder how many people think that when they hear or say “o'clock”...

"Good-bye" is a contraction of "God be with ye" – I'm sure there are many others.

From what I've observed, Abenaki speakers tend to drop the first and/or last syllables if the meaning is obvious (or at least can be induced) from the context.

How to use the suggested text "1491"

The question was raised in class about how to make best use of the 400-page book that I suggested as a basis for understanding many of the issues I will discuss during our course.

I was at a loss to suggest anything other than reading the whole book, and I think Kate agreed with me. Mann weaves stories into his themes, and moves back and forth in time and bounces around from place to place, as suits his narrative.

On reflection, I do acknowledge that there are some sections in which he gets somewhat bogged down in details. These sections can be fascinating if you're enjoying the arcana of the topic, but may not add a lot to your overall understanding. I would say that if you get to such a point in your reading, just skip ahead to the next section.

During the course of our sessions, I will try to make reference to specific page numbers where I have drawn ideas, and if you want more information on that topic, you could go there to read what Mann has to say. My page numbers refer to the paperback printing of the 2nd Edition (July 2011).

Nomenclature

I spoke to the issue of naming; whether to use "Indian" or some other term, such as "Native American" – and I introduced the concepts of exonyms and endonyms. Mann has more to say on this issue in his Appendix A (page 393-398).

In that Appendix, Mann mentions that the word "European" was not in use when the traders and colonists first arrived from across the Atlantic, and was not coined until the 17th Century. Likewise, the concept of "race" was invented in Europe around the same time, largely as a way to justify the mistreatment of different-looking peoples.

Along those lines, I resent being called "white" – ASFAT*

- ASFAT = a story for another time
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Ecological Management

I answered a question about burning of the forest floor. My Aunt Jane (my father's sister) used to live in Pound Ridge, New York. I often wondered where that name came from, and recently I learned the answer. The local Indians created a "pound" or enclosure (similar to a stockade, a structure in which animals are "impounded"), along a ridge there. During hunting season, they would conduct a drive in which they chased the deer into one end of the pound, where they were corralled and easily "harvested" (killed).

Elsewhere, Indians created similar structures or took advantage of natural gullies and other narrow spaces, driving the deer into a small area where they were an easy target.

All of this may help to explain why the Natives never felt the need to domesticate wild animals for food. It was easier to manage the landscape in such a way as to be able to round them up whenever they needed food.

When the Algonkin Indians harvested any food (plant or animal), they would thank its source, and bless the food. In the case of animals, they would ask forgiveness before killing them.

A note on weapons: the bow and arrow were probably developed in order to facilitate hunting, but obviously (being deadly) they could be used in warfare as well (more anon). When the English colonists arrived in what was newly being called New England (the name was a propaganda tool to warn off the French, who were also claiming parts of the territory). the Indians had far superior weaponry. The English muskets of that era were, by comparison with the bow and arrow, weak, inaccurate, and unreliable.

Written Language

Another question related to whether the New England/Northeast Indians had a written language. The short answer was (and continues to be) "No." I did mention the *kipu* (knotted strings) of the Inka and the glyphs of the Mayas and Aztecs. But these were not nearly as sophisticated as the European writing systems, and put the Natives at a big disadvantage in terms of information conveyance over long distances.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that the only writing systems in the Americas belonged to its only Empires (an empire being defined as a conglomeration of dissimilar cultures and peoples, usually by military conquest).

I also mentioned a vague memory I had of a nascent writing system to the south

of us. I had to refresh my memory with a bit of research, and found a good explanation in Jared Diamond's book⁶. It turns out this was a post-colonial imitation of European systems. A Cherokee Indian named Sequoyah invented his own representation of sounds in the Cherokee language sometime between 1810 and 1820.

As an aside, the Cherokee, then in Georgia, were originally part of the Haudenosaunee, and glottochronology places their separation at several thousand years ago. Although the languages are recognizably the same, they shared only about 20% of their vocabularies. By comparison, the Tuscarora, who also had split off and moved to North Carolina, still had nearly a 70% match in vocabulary words, suggesting that they had been separated for about 700 years. Under pressure from the English in North Carolina, the Tuscarora left and rejoined the Haudenosaunee in New York state.

Peaceable People

A couple of Chat submissions that I did not address were:

- *"At what point did the Americans begin to resent and make war with the European settlers?" **
- *"... [granted,] the English were ruthless, especially in the 1700's. But I believe in the mid-1600's there was a more peaceable relationship between Americans and Europeans."*

Indian saying: *"You can't feed your family if you're fighting."*

There are no easy or simple answers to how much the Natives changed their behavior after contact. There is no documentary evidence of what life was like here before the Europeans arrived. We have legends and oral tradition (such as has survived) and archaeological evidence, but all of that requires interpretation.

* Terminology that should be noted: referring to the Europeans as "settlers" or "pioneers" is very insulting to the aboriginal Americans, who had tamed and managed the land for thousands of years before the Europeans came. The Europeans were interested in extraction (traders) or expropriation (colonists).

Many Native Americans refer to the process of revitalizing (taking back) their language and culture as "decolonization" – the term "colonial" is not value-neutral, but is meant as an insult.

Think back to what I said about the timeline. The first Europeans arrived in this area (the Northeast) not long after Columbus. They were traders, not colonists.

⁶ pp 228-230 in Diamond, Jared (1999) *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*

They were interested in extracting value from the landscape and shipping it back to Europe for a profit. Beaver (amiskw) pelts are a prime example, but there were other products as well.

When the first colonial explorers arrived, looking for places to set up colonies, they were surprised to see Indians wearing European clothing, such as cloth shirts, instead of the native buckskin outfits. They encountered people who could speak French or English or even Basque. (The Basques were whalers, and plied the waters off the shores of New France and Northern New England, bringing their catch onto the beaches to boil the blubber down to oil.)

As the extraction industry grew, so did the conflicts over the control of the fur trade. The Indians began to get enmeshed in the European conflicts.

Some of the earliest evidence of Indian involvement in European warfare/rivalries came during the early days of the Pilgrims. Here is a description of how the first shared Thanksgiving got started:

"...the Wampanoags showed up unbidden. And it was not simply four or five of them at the table, as we often imagine. Ousamequin, the Massasoit, arrived with perhaps ninety men—more than the entire population of Plymouth. Wampanoag tradition suggests that the group was in fact an army, honoring a mutual-defense pact negotiated the previous spring. They came not to enjoy a multicultural feast but to aid the Pilgrims: hearing repeated gunfire, they assumed that the settlers were under attack." ⁷

When Henry Hudson first sailed up the Muhheconnituck (which the Dutch later called the North River) in 1609, he was greeted warmly. In accordance with their tradition of welcoming strangers, the Mohicans, on both sides of the river, came aboard to greet him and to bring gifts.

But because of a trigger-happy crew, several unfortunate incidents convinced the Indians that the new arrivals had not come in peace, and by the time Hudson had turned around and was headed south, he was no longer welcome and was being chased away.

A couple of generations later, in New England, where the Indians still outnumbered the colonists, they began to realize that the incoming ships full of Europeans would soon overwhelm them. King Philip (Metacomet, son of Massasoit) rallied the Indians to attempt to eradicate the colonists. King Philip's

⁷ 1621: (November) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/11/25/the-invention-of-thanksgiving>

War (1675-6) was the bloodiest of all American conflicts, with a large percentage of the European population killed. Still, the Indians did not know how to fight a European-style war, and many of the braves died of starvation during the winter for a lack of provisions. In the end, the colonists won, and the Indians, after that, became supplicants.

Meanwhile, the Dutch, from their colony in New Amsterdam, were taking over the rich agricultural lands that had been cleared and farmed by the Mohicans for hundreds of years. They enlisted the Mohawks to help drive the Mohicans out of the river valley, over the Taconics into Housatonic.

So, no, I wouldn't say that the 1600's were a peaceful time.

All of this history of conflict is hugely complicated, and something I am trying to avoid. I would rather focus on the culture of the natives, not on how their way of life was disrupted by the colonists.

Granted, it is necessary to have some idea of how badly the Indians were treated, but I'm not sure how much we can learn from dwelling on that.