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## COMMENTARY

# Bringing Back Our Lost Language

## STRONG WOMAN AND MOONDANCER

### INTRODUCTION

Before the Europeans came to these shores in search of wealth and religious freedom for themselves, about 12,000 Wampanoag Indians lived in southeastern New England—8,000 on the mainland and 4,000 on the islands. After the King Philip's War (1675-1676) only about 400 Wampanoag people survived. No one has done a complete history of all these people following the war. Throughout the years, blood mixing, laws, disease, racist attitudes, and isolation have disintegrated the looks, language, and lore of the First Americans in this region. But Indian culture was never completely replaced by Christianity or European culture. A people, a culture, does not want to die!

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Strong Woman (Julianne Jennings) is Wampanoag and serves as vice president of Aquidneck Indian Council as well as project director of The Massachusetts Language Revival Project. Moondancer (Francis Joseph O'Brien, Jr.) received his Ph.D. from Columbia University and is president of the Aquidneck Indian Council and a researcher/editor on The Massachusetts Language Revival Project. Both are members of the Seaconke Tribe, Wampanoag Nation.

The ancient language of the Wampanoag Indians and related Algonquian-speakers today is called Massachusett. This language, like most Indian languages, was oral. It was the language spoken by The Massasoit Ousa Mequin, by Annawan, and by all of the Indians that lived in the region. The Massachusett language has been sleeping since the early 1800s. Even in the early 1700s, some were no longer speaking the language fluently. Because Wampanoag ancestors were considered a conquered people and no longer able to practice our culture, the new ways of Europeans slowly replaced many of the old ways. It seems that the parents and grandparents just refused to teach their children the old language, maybe because they saw the pain involved in being Indian in a world no longer theirs.

Eventually the old language fell silent, as did all of the Indian languages across southern New England, from Cape Cod and beyond to the Hudson River. Across Turtle Island—what we call the United States of America—more than 125 American Indian languages have become extinct through the harsh lessons of American history. Many more are on the brink of extinction.

Today many people want their ancient Massachusett language back and are willing to work hard to learn a very complicated language. A language is the essence of being human. Knowing the language of one's Native American ancestors makes one unmistakably Indian. Rebuilding the Massachusett language involves intense research and cooperation among Indians, language scholars, and others. Next to no funding is available to tribes or councils who want to bring back their lost language.

### THE MASSACHUSETT LANGUAGE

In 1620 when the English landed at Plymouth, they walked into the abandoned village of Patuxet, which was on the land of the Wampanoag. When a separate group of English landed in 1630, first in Salem, then Boston, they entered the land of the Massachusêuck (The Massachuset People or "People of the Great Hills"). The Massachusêuck, the Wampanoag, and other indigenous people along the coast were victims of catastrophic diseases introduced by previous European explorers as early as 1612-1613, with the mortality rate reaching 90 percent. This is

the main reason why Europeans met virtually no resistance when they came ashore.

In the Boston area, the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company said that the principal aim of the English colony was to "incite" the Native peoples to accept and practice the Christian religion. Certain laws were even passed later to ensure that the Indians would accept Christianity and not practice their own religion. But only the English missionaries took seriously this goal of conversion. One English name stands out above all others in connection with the recording of the language of the Wampanoag and other Algonquian-speaking peoples of southeastern New England: John Eliot, a Congregationalist minister who came to New England in 1631. Eliot began to learn this unwritten language. He was convinced that only by being able to communicate with Native peoples in their own language could he achieve the goal of spreading Christianity to the Indians. One day the local Massachusetts sachem, Waban, asked Eliot to explain Christian teachings. Later Eliot and his now "praying Indians" founded a European-style village at Natick in Massachusetts. This village was called a "praying village." Here Eliot worked with his devoted teacher (and servant of thirty-five years) Job Nesutan to learn the language. Eliot worked with Nesutan and other Indians to translate the Holy Bible into the Massachusetts language. The Indian Bible (written entirely in the local Natick dialect of Massachusetts) was published in 1663 at Harvard University, and a second edition was printed in 1685 (many Bibles were destroyed in the King Philip's War).

John Sassamon, Cochenoe, and James Printer are other Indians who made possible the translation and publication of the Bible, though hardly anyone ever mentions Indians' contributions. Without them there would have been no Bible. If Issac Newton could humbly claim he stood on the shoulders of giants to accomplish his work, we can say the same of John Eliot and his Indian teachers.

The Indian Bible is not written in the same way that Indians spoke the Massachusetts language. Like the English-language Bible with its abstract language, the Indian Bible was meant to teach the Christian faith, which is very different from the Indian religion. But the Eliot Bible is one of the most important primary sources we have for the pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of the language. In fact, the Massachusetts lan-

guage is perhaps the only language which has any chance of being revived since we know more about this language than any other in the region. It is ironic that the missionary John Eliot, who came here to destroy Indian culture, actually preserved the language in written form. We must be thankful to the Natick Indian Job Nesutan, and John Sassamon, Cochenoe, and James Printer, for they ultimately are the safekeepers of our language.

### NARRAGANSETT LANGUAGE

The Narragansett language, once spoken by the Narragansetts, is quite similar to Massachusett. Narragansett was understood throughout New England. Scholars refer to Massachusett and Narragansett as dialects of the same language. Narragansett was partially recorded by Roger Williams and published in his book, *A Key into the Language of America* in 1643.<sup>1</sup> Williams was writing a book so that the English who came here would have a phrase book to use in communicating with the local people. This book, which seems to give some of the actual speech patterns of the Narragansetts (and the Wampanoag), is well worth getting. Williams did a better job than Eliot of recording the sounds of the language.

### THE MASSACHUSETT LANGUAGE AS WRITTEN BY INDIANS

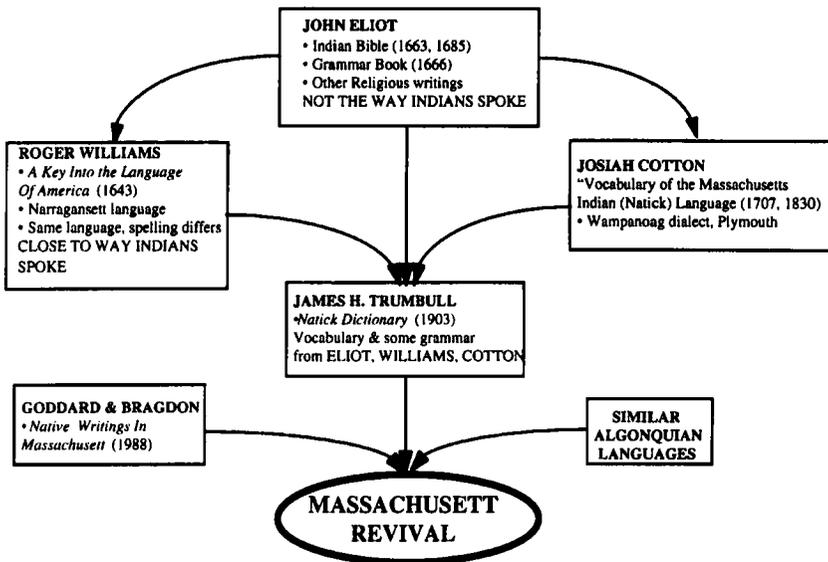
Ten years ago a book came out called *Native Writings in Massachusetts* by Ives Goddard and Kathleen Bragdon, two of the top scholars who work on the technical aspects of our language.<sup>2</sup> This book is printed as two volumes, the first of which has writings from Wampanoag Indians of the 1600s and 1700s. The second volume is technical, dealing with the grammar of the language.

### TEACHING THE LANGUAGE

Last year we published the first book written for Indians on the language. The textbook—*Understanding Algonquian Indian Words (New England)*—was published with the help of a grant from The Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities (a state program of the National Endowment for

the Humanities).<sup>3</sup> We give about 1,400 entries in the dictionary part of the book and cover grammar and other aspects of the language at a basic level for the beginning learner.<sup>4</sup> We are recognized throughout the area as being knowledgeable about the language.<sup>5</sup>

Since the time of our book's publication, our council has been preparing classroom teaching materials on the language. Our efforts at reviving the language involve making up teaching materials to instruct tribal members about pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. These materials along with the book will enable us to teach the elements of the Massachusetts-Narragansett language. The following diagram shows the main sources we use in our research into the language.



Massachusetts Language Revival Program  
 Aquidneck Indian Council  
 Mar. 1998

FIGURE 1. Sources of Information for the Massachusetts Language Revival Program<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, we show you one of our translations of a traditional Wampanoag thanksgiving prayer.

WAMPANOAG PRAYER

*Great Spirit, I offer this tobacco  
Mother Earth, I offer this tobacco  
Grandmother Moon, I offer this tobacco  
Grandfather Sun, I offer this tobacco  
I thank you  
I offer this tobacco to the four directions  
to the east  
to the south  
to the west  
to the north  
I thank you for all my relations  
the winged nation  
creeping and crawling nation  
the four-legged nation  
the green and growing nation  
and all things living in the water  
Honoring the clans  
the deer  
the bear  
the wolf  
the turtle  
the snipe  
Great Spirit, I offer this tobacco*

WAMPANOAG PRAYER IN MASSACHUSETT  
LANGUAGE

Nuppeântam

Keihtanit, nummag ne wuttamâuog  
 Ohke, nummag ne wuttamâuog  
 Okummus nepâuzshad, nummag ne wuttamâuog  
 Wutt∞tchïkkinneasin nippâwus, nummag ne wuttamâuog  
 Taûbot neanawáyea  
 Nummag ne wuttamâuog adt yau ut nashik ohke  
 wompanniyeu  
 sowanniyeu  
 pahtatunniyeu  
 nannummiyeu  
 Taûbot neanawáyea newutche wame netomppauog  
 neg pámunenutcheq  
 neg pámompakecheq  
 puppinashimwog  
 mehtugquash kah moskehtuash  
 namohsog  
 Quttianumóonk weechinnineummoncheq  
 ahtuk  
 mosq  
 mukquoshim  
 tunnuppasog  
 sasaso  
 Keihtanit, nūmmag ne wuttamâuog

The character ∞ is sound of “o” in “wolf” or “woman”.

## NOTES

1. Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America* (London: Gregory Dexter, 1643).

2. Ives Goddard and Kathleen J. Bragdon, *Native Writings in Massachusetts (Parts 1 & 2)*, *American Philosophical Society Memoir 185*. (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1988).

3. Moondancer and Strong Woman, *Understanding Algonquian Indian Words (New England)* (Newport, RI: Aquidneck Indian Council, 1996).

4. We acknowledge the assistance of our Principal Humanities Scholars, Tall Oak (council elder) and Karl V. Teeter (professor emeritus of linguistics, Harvard University). We also acknowledge the guidance, support, and love of the late Slow Turtle, Supreme Medicine Man of the Wampanoag Nation.

5. Last year the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities contacted us to provide a Massachusetts language translation to be carved on a permanent monument in Providence, Rhode Island. This engraving may be one of the few public testaments of the Indian tongues spoken here for over 12,000 years.

6. John Eliot, *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old Testament and New Translated into the Indian Language by John Eliot* (Cambridge: Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson, 1663). John Eliot, *The Indian Grammar Begun; or, an Essay to Bring The Indian Language into Rules for the Help of Such as Desire to Learn the Same for the Furtherance of the Gospel Among Them* (Cambridge: Marmaduke Johnson, 1666). Josiah Cotton, "Vocabulary of the Massachusetts (Natick) Indian Language," in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collection, Serial 3, Vol. II* (Cambridge, 1830). James H. Trumbull, *Natick Dictionary* (Washington, DC: Bureau of American Ethnology, 1903).