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**FRANK SPECK AND
"THE OLD MOHEGAN INDIAN STONE CUTTER"**

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Abstract

Frank Speck told a story to a Wampanoag Indian of an encounter he had with a Mohegan Indian ghost. The author interprets this story as serving two purposes. First, it created a bond between Speck and the people among whom he did research. Second, it affirmed Indian supernatural belief in a context where the scrutiny by an outside observer could possibly threaten these beliefs.

Outsiders to a community can threaten its culture simply by doubting it. For example, the earliest European settlers in the Northeast refused to believe that they could see the spirits that appeared to Indians in ritual and consequently the Indians reported that they too could not see their own spirits when Europeans were present. One passage by Edward Winslow regarding the Wampanoag near Plymouth, Massachusetts illustrates the point: "They have told me I should see the devil [guardian spirit] at those times come to the party; but I assured myself and them of the contrary, which so proved; yea, themselves have confessed they never saw him when any of us were present" (Winslow 1910 [1624]: 344).¹

This paper concerns the opposite case, where corroborative testimony by an outsider validates a group's confidence in its symbols. Such testimony is particularly effective if the outsider first doubts the efficacy of cultural representations and then is won over to becoming a believer. The confessions of religious converts often describe their passage from doubt, through surrender, to revelation, and acceptance. The account of Frank Speck and "The Old Mohegan Indian Stone Cutter" presents a case of polite disbelief followed by a transforming supernatural experience that affirms Indian belief and also their acceptance of Speck. The outsider (Speck) attests to the reality of the Mohegan ghost and thus reinforces rather than threatens Indian commitment to their folk symbols. The text also provides a rare instance of a host community integrating an anthropologist into its cultural heritage.²

Frank G. Speck (1881-1950) completed his doctoral work at Columbia under Franz Boas in 1908 and that same year moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he built the Anthropology Department and devoted his entire scholarly career to ethnographic research on the Indian people of the eastern United States and Canada (Hallowell 1951: 69). Even today Speck's work is the most important corpus of primary information on the acculturated and submerged nations of the eastern woodlands. He began his anthropological inquiries among the hundred or so Mohegans near Norwich, Connecticut about 1900 or 1901 while an undergraduate at Columbia.³ As an undergraduate he collaborated with the respected linguist J. Dyneley Prince on the translation of Mohegan texts; he continued Connecticut Indian research until 1905, when he turned his attention to field inquiries in Oklahoma and

Indian Territory (Prince 1903; Prince and Speck 1903a; 1903b; 1904; Speck 1903a; 1903b; 1903c; 1903d; 1904a; 1904b; 1909). Speck returned to Mohegan several times during the winter of 1912-13 to complete a study of decorative art (Speck 1915a), and about this time began his collaboration with Gladys I. Tantaquidgeon on the folklore and medicinal beliefs of her people (Speck 1915b; 317-20). Speck again spent "some time in residence at the old Mohegan village" shortly before 1925 when he completed *Native Tribes and Dialects of Connecticut: A Mohegan-Pequot Diary* (1928a: 205). Whether he visited the Mohegan on other occasions or after 1925 is unclear. Elderly Mohegans living today remember Speck fondly and one still cherishes two small paintings that he made, one of the Mohegan Wigwam Festival, and the other of his imagined reconstruction of an early historic Mohegan village.

I first learned of "The Old Mohegan Indian Stone Cutter" in 1983 from Courtland Eliphalet Fowler, the 78 year old Tribal Chairman of the Mohegan community who lives on Mohegan Hill in Uncasville, near Norwich, in New London County, Connecticut. Mr. Fowler retrieved a copy of the original typed text from among his many letters, clippings, publications, and other memorabilia concerning Mohegan history, and gave it to me as I interviewed him on the subject of Mohegan folklore. Mr. Fowler (whose appearance resembles that of Samson Occom, his eighteenth-century ancestor) did not recall how he acquired the text or who wrote it, and valued it mainly for its local Indian interest.⁴ The typed account appears to have been photocopied from a newsletter that I have been unable to identify, and the anonymous author identified him or herself only as "the Editor." Clearly the author wrote it down after Speck's death, in 1950. He or she was probably a Wampanoag from southeastern Massachusetts, for an unrelated passage at the bottom of the page refers to the desirability of obtaining a headquarters for the FEIL (Federated East Indian League), on the Watuppa lands, the site of the old Fall River, Massachusetts, Wampanoag reservation. Speck visited the Wampanoag area in 1921 (1928b) and continued to conduct research among the Mashpee and Herring Pond people as late as 1946, and at Gay Head on Martha's Vineyard as late as 1947 (Speck and Dexter 1948).⁵ Thus Speck worked extensively among the Mohegan and had many opportunities to speak of these experiences among the Wampanoag.

The Wampanoag narrative about Speck is a memorate—that is, a concrete personal account of an actual supernatural experience, as opposed to the less experiential and more stereotypical form of narrative found in legend, myth and folktales.⁶ It is a secondary or once-retold memorate because it does not convey Speck's original account but rather is an Indian's retelling of Speck's story. The text is reproduced here in its entirety with silent corrections for spelling and typographical errors:

THE OLD MOHEGAN INDIAN STONE CUTTER

By the Editor

The late and beloved Dr. Frank G. Speck who spent his life working as an ethnologist and an organizer among the Indian Tribes of the east once related to me one of his strangest and unforgettable experiences. He said that as is the manner of many college trained students he listened to superstitious stories as related to him by Indian friends but that he certainly did not believe in them that is until when

one time something happened that was to change his whole viewpoint about Indian ghost stories.

Dr. Speck had gone up to do some field work among the Mohegan Indians who live at Mohegan Hill in the village of Uncassville, Connecticut. He was having supper with a Mohegan couple with whom he had spent the day taking notes on folklore and herbal lore. It had been a pleasant day and they had rambled through the woods in the old Mohegan settlement and he had worked up quite an appetite. I believe that the name of the couple was Cooper and as she was preparing a big supper Indian style with corn bread, succotash, Indian Pudding and pork sausage, Dr. Speck said that as he looked out of the window he could see the orange moon beginning to rise through the tree tops. "Oh look" he said, "There is going to be a beautiful fullmoon tonite." As he said this he said that the man looked at his wife and said something in a low voice that was not intended for Dr. Speck to hear. He noticed this but said nothing.

When supper was ready, Dr. Speck and the Coopers sat down to a hearty meal and really enjoyed themselves. After the meal they got up and sat down around the kitchen stove and relaxed with the good smell of woodsmoke and Doc lit up a cigar. He was so relaxed he said that he did not notice the time and when he looked at his watch he said that it was time for him to go back to Cynthia Fowler's house. The lady then looked at Dr. Speck in a strange way and said that she and her husband thought it best that he remained with them for the night. Doc replied that since Cynthia would be expecting him he thought that he should be on his way. Both husband and wife then looked at each other strangely and seemed to be sort of embarrassed. Dr. Speck then spoke up and asked if there was something wrong. The woman stopped rocking in her chair and looked at Dr. Speck directly and said, "Dr. Speck the old Indian Stone Cutter will be working tonite!" He looked at the woman relieved and said, "Well that's allright with me. I don't mind if he is working tonite and I can understand if he has so much work to do during the day that at night he might have to work over to finish up his chores." The woman and her husband looked again at each other and it was then that Dr. Speck knew by their glances that something was really wrong.

Finally the man spoke up and said, "Dr. Speck the old Indian Stone Cutter has been dead over 30 years and when the moon is full he comes out to work and you will have to pass right by the quarry where he works and you will be sure to hear him. We think you had better stay with us tonite!" The Dr. did not wish to hurt their feelings by telling that he did not believe in such things but he decided to be tactful about the matter. "Now don't you folks worry, he began, If anything goes wrong I will let you know tomorrow but I will be all right!" He bade them both good night and started out through the woods whistling. As he came close to the quarry, he felt strange and stopped for a moment. The chink, chink sound of someone cutting stone was coming from the quarry. Dr. Speck said to himself, "Oh that is just my imagination playing tricks upon me." He started to walk again and the closer he came to the quarry the louder the sound of stone cutting became. He thought to himself I will go see who is out cutting stone at this hour. Finally as he walked closer to the sound and as it became louder he could see no one in sight though the moon was nice and clear. Suddenly the sound stopped and he felt relieved and knew that it was only his imagination. He breathed a sigh of relief but suddenly the sound commenced again and this time it was directly in back of him. He wheeled around and saw no one and then he decided to move. He ran thorough the woods and the sound followed him and he never stopped until he reached the Cooper home. He bolted in the door and there was a note on the table by the lamp. It said, "We knew that you would be back. Your bed is all turned down. See you in the morning." He went to bed right away but said that he could

not forget how those sounds followed him. From that moment on whenever the Indian people gave him advice or told him about some haunted spot to stay away from, Dr. Frank G. Speck never made light of their superstitions and if they advised him not to go to this place or that place he heeded them.

Hearing the old Mohegan Indian Stone Cutter had made him a changed man.

We may assume that the anonymous author heard the core of his story from Speck, for it states that Speck intended to lodge at the home of Cynthia Fowler whom Speck identified elsewhere as an important informant during his 1912-13 visits (Speck 1915a: 1). More significantly, however, Speck described the Indian stone cutter in 1928, in *Native Tribes and Dialects of Connecticut: A Mohegan-Pequot Diary*:

A ghost still holds forth on the steep hillside among the rocks. Some of the Indians, in fact most of them, have at one time or another heard the clinking maul and wedge of some one splitting stone there on dark nights (Speck 1928a: 254).

Speck's published account of the stone cutter legend may be a condensation of many memorates that he heard from individual Mohegans. The 1928 version differs from the later text primarily in the fact that it leaves out testimonies of personal experience, including Speck's own. We might wonder if Speck disclosed details of the experience in personal conversations that he preferred not to print in a scholarly publication, or if he or the Wampanoag author improved the original story to some extent.⁷ We of course cannot adequately answer these questions without a record of Speck's original oral account to the Indian editor. Certainly the anonymous Wampanoag and Mr. Fowler had made the legend their own by their interest in and satisfaction with the story.

An examination of the motifs of the stone cutter texts reveals many relationships with English and Euro-American folklore, but nothing that can be identified specifically as American Indian.⁸ The preponderance of English and Euro-American motifs is not surprising, for the Mohegan and all other New England Indian groups have been fashioning their legends for years with motifs borrowed from the surrounding non-Indian society (Speck 1904a:183; Thompson 1919). What else can be said of Speck's meeting with the Indian ghost? First of all it validated the reality of Indian belief through the testimony of an outsider and reformed non-believer, and did so in a particularly effective way. Speck ignored his hosts' hospitality and challenged their beliefs by not taking them seriously and subsequently learned the wisdom of their point of view the hard way by actually encountering their ghost.⁹ Secondly, the tone of the narrative reflects a strong emotional bond between Speck and the Mohegans that is enhanced through the structure of a rite of passage. In the first phase Speck is at home with an Indian family which he then leaves, despite their warning. During his passage alone in the woods at night and under a full moon, he hears the sounds of the Indian ghost. Following this frightening encounter with supernatural power he returns back across the threshold of Mohegan society, a believer in the reality of Indian spirits. The course of Speck's enlightenment is curiously reminiscent of certain early historic patterns in southern New England Algonquian culture. His journey into the woods where he meets a ghost and his return as a changed person parallels male initiation rites described by Winslow (1910 [1624]: 345-

46), and Isaack de Rasieres (1963 [1628]:78-79). The pre-Christian Wampanoag sent their young men into the woods for an extended period of time; while there, they sought visions of the mythical Hobbamock, who represented the spirits of dead persons, and who appeared in diverse shapes to frighten people and confer important powers upon them. After this encounter the initiates returned to society elevated and sanctioned by the vision experience. Speck's transformation as described in the legend follows the aboriginal pattern, over two hundred years after it was last reported by any historical source. Although we are not suggesting that this vision quest pattern persisted covertly in New England among people of Indian descent, it may have lived on to some extent in their feelings about the meaning of unusual events experienced alone in the woods.

Be that as it may, the final observation brings us back to Speck, the anthropologist. We know that Speck identified with and was accepted by his many Indian associates. For example, while ailing and shortly before his death, he attended a Seneca ceremony performed in his honor "after which he felt somewhat better" (Beck 1951: 415). This earlier memorate, which Speck told to the 20th century Wampanoag, about his meeting with the Mohegan ghost, no doubt served him well as a character reference among his New England Indian hosts, and possibly diverted them from feeling that he, the college-trained scholar, might consider their beliefs to be naive curiosities. By hearing the sounds of the old Mohegan stone cutter Speck gave an authoritative outsider's blessing to their own cultural world, and they seem to have appreciated it. By possessing and retelling the story as their own, their culture has yet to give up the ghost.¹⁰

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Notes

1. Winslow's is not the only recorded case of this interesting phenomenon. Daniel Denton wrote that on Long Island: "the priest by his Conjunction brings in a devil amongst them, in the shape sometimes of a fowl, sometimes of a beast, and sometimes of a man . . . but if any *English* at such times do come amongst them, it puts a period to their proceeding, and they will desire their absence, telling them their God will not come whilst they are there" (Denton 1670: 8-9). Similarly, Adriaen Van der Donck wrote of Algonquian people near the lower Hudson River that: "When their charming has continued some time, then the devil, as they say, appears to them in the form of a beast. . . . If there be any Christians present on those occasions, who observe all their doings, then their devil will not appear" (Van der Donck 1841 [1656]: 203).
2. The Hopi at Walpi told a strikingly similar legend about how the archaeologist and ethnographer J. Walter Fewkes encountered the Hopi Earth God, Masauwu and

- "gave up to him" and said he would "be like them and believe in Masauwu" (Nequatewa 1967: 123). I am grateful to Clara Sue Kidwell for bringing this legend to my attention. The Hopi also incorporated Fewkes into their art (Dockstader 1979: 528, Fig. 5). Other examples of anthropologists being integrated into local lore include Brandes (1974) and Messenger (1964).
3. Speck first worked in this general region as early as 1898 when he visited a former Niantic village site in East Lyme, Connecticut (Speck 1918: 69).
 4. For pictures of Occom, see Conkey, Boissevain and Goddard (1978: 182, Fig. 5), Simmons (1982: 80), and Simmons and Simmons (1982: following page 121).
 5. A Gay Head Wampanoag served as president of the Federated East Indian League in 1961 (Levitas 1980: 407). He may have written the stone cutter text. Because Levitas refers to this person by a pseudonym, I will not identify him by name.
 6. For discussions of the memorate genre see Degh and Vazsonyi (1974), Honko (1964), and von Sydow (1948: 87).
 7. The 1928 text differs from the later one in one obvious detail. In 1928 Speck stated that the ghost came forth on dark nights whereas in the longer text the ghost appears during a full moon.
 8. The Thompson (1956) and Baughman (1966) motifs are:
 - E 336. *Non-malevolent mine ghosts*. England; United States.
 - E 402. *Mysterious ghostlike noises heard*. Finnish-Swedish; New York; England.
 - E. 402.1.5. *Invisible ghost makes rapping or knocking noise*. England; United States.
 - E 402.1.8(i). *Ghost makes noise of digging in mine*. Pennsylvania.
 - E 402.3. *Sound made by ghostly object*. United States.
 - E 415. *Dead cannot rest until certain work is finished*. North Carolina; New York; West Indies.
 - E 587.5. *Ghost walks at midnight*. United States.
 - E. 587.6. *Ghosts walk at full moon*. Hawaii.
- One cannot dismiss the possibility of indigenous Indian influence, however, for the seventeenth-century spirit Hobbamock often appeared in human form.
9. Despite the absence of overt Indian content in the motifs, the overall structure of the memorate reveals similarities to another genre of American Indian narrative, the folktale. In *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* Alan Dundes observed that "One of the most widespread structural patterns in North American Indian folktales is a four motifeme sequence consisting of Interdiction, Violation, Consequence . . . and an Attempted Escape . . . from the consequence" (Dundes 1964: 64). Following Waterman (1914), Dundes also pointed out that American Indian tales often include "an explanatory motif . . . which serves as a terminal marker" (Dundes 1964: 67). This four motifeme sequence is apparent in the stone cutter story: 1) Speck's hosts warn him not to go outdoors, 2) he ignores the warning, 3) he hears the ghost, and 4) he reverses his route to escape the ghost. The account even includes a terminal explanatory motif for at the end we are told that this is why Speck "never made light of their superstitions and if they advised him not to go to this place or that place he heeded them." Whether Speck had absorbed and reproduced the structure of Indian folktales, or the Wampanoag editor had imposed the structure himself, the memorate possesses some formal qualities of American Indian folktales. Some elements of this structure probably reflect a more universal phenomenon. Lauri Honko suggested that the surprising supernatural experiences known as memorates occur to individuals who have violated a cultural norm and subconsciously fear the consequences. According to Honko, the violator then would be more vulnerable to expecting and therefore experiencing some form of culturally defined reprimand such as a fright from a visiting spirit (Honko 1964: 17-18).
 10. In his comments on this article, William Sturtevant suggested that Speck used his professional status (as "Doc" and "Dr. Frank Speck") to establish distance from *and* intimacy with Indian informants. This distance and intimacy reflects an ambivalence that is apparent also in the stone cutter legend and in Speck's participation in the Seneca curing ritual. In both cases he walked a middle line

between the scientist and the believer. He obtained important cultural information for anthropologists and at the same time validated Indian belief by experiencing it himself. The fact that he sought a Seneca healing ritual and wrote about it shortly before his death suggests that his approach was more than calculated fieldwork strategy, and that he had an unusual capacity to participate in and empathize with an alien cultural identity while maintaining his own (see Speck 1949: 35-59; and, Seneca of Coldspring Longhouse 1949: 60-64).

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