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Wôbanaki Lifeways - Circa 1600

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Abstract
The term Wôbanakiak includes many culturally related groups of Native peoples who were the original inhabitants of present-day Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, parts of Massachusetts, parts of southern Canada, and the Maritimes. Wôbanakiak means “people of the east” or “Dawnland people.” Linguistically, the word includes the morphemes for dawn (wôban), and land (-aki), combined with an animate plural ending (-ak) to indicate people. English, French, and Dutch attempts to pronounce the Native language resulted in different spellings and pronunciations such as Wabanaki, Abenaki, Abénaquis, and Abnaki.

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Who are the Wôbanakiak?

The term Wôbanakiak includes many culturally related groups of Native peoples who were the original inhabitants of present-day Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, parts of Massachusetts, parts of southern Canada, and the Maritimes. Wôbanakiak means “people of the east” or “Dawnland people.” Linguistically, the word includes the morphemes for dawn (wôban), and land (-aki), combined with an animate plural ending (-ak) to indicate people. English, French, and Dutch attempts to pronounce the Native language resulted in different spellings and pronunciations such as Wabanaki, Abenaki, Abénaquis, and Abnaki.

Several of the closely related Native tribes in present-day Vermont and southern Quebec, including the Missisquoi, Cowass, and Sokoki, are often collectively referred to as Abenaki, Western Abenaki, or St. Francis Abenaki. The Native peoples of present-day New Hampshire, such as the Pennacook and Pequawket, have been called, depending on the historian, Western, Central, or Eastern Abenaki. These two groups were close allies with the Native peoples of the middle Connecticut River valley, the Agawam, Nonetuck, Pocumtuck, Quaboag and Woronoco. For the purposes of this website, we are using the term Wôbanakiak to refer to all of these culturally related peoples.

The Wôbanakiak are also part of a much larger group of culturally and linguistically related tribes called Algonkin or Algonquian peoples, which includes all the Native Nations of New England, most of Canada, and the Great Lakes. These peoples originally shared many cultural beliefs and behaviors and many spoke the same root language, which has been identified as “proto-Algonquian.”

Historians have often confused the identity of these peoples and tribes, since so many of them began shifting residence during the 17th and 18th centuries when forced out of their homelands by European warfare and invasion. European observers usually identified Native peoples by the places where they seemed to be living at the moment. Many Native people from the Connecticut River valley moved, after 1676, to the Native refugee village of Schaghticoke, in present-day New York state, and then later moved north, to live with Missisquoi, Cowass, Sokoki, and/or St. Francis Abenaki people. Many different tribes were represented in the Native people who moved to the village of St. Francis, or Odanak. The term Wôbanakiak includes all of the Native people from northern New England who came and went from Odanak over time, and who have been called, collectively, St. Francis Abenaki Indians.

Who are the Wôbanakiak who participated in the 1704 Raid on Deerfield?
In 1704, the Wabanaki participating in the Deerfield raid represented at least six different culturally related communities – Cowass, Missisquoi, Pennacook, Pocumtuck, Sokoki, and St. Francis. Although these peoples originally came from present-day Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Canada, many individuals also regularly passed through or, at times, lived in, St. Francis, the Native village on the St. Lawrence that was one of the starting and ending points of the 1704 raid. None of their easternmost neighbors among the culturally related Native tribes living in Maine and the Maritimes – the Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot, who are generally called Wabanaki or Eastern Abenaki – took part in the raid on Deerfield.

Ancient Oral Traditions

The landscape of Ndamina, the Wobanaki homeland, is regarded as animate, communal territory, supporting both human and non-human inhabitants in reciprocal social and spiritual relationships. The sense of connection to the land was, philosophically, one of relationship, more than outright possession. Linguistically, and spiritually, the land itself and many of the formations upon it, including rocks and mountains, were regarded as imbued with life and spirit, rather than seemingly inanimate rock and dirt. Creation stories relate how all the living beings, including the awaasak (animals), namsasak (fish), sipsak (birds), abaziak (trees), nebonsisizak (medicine plants), and other beings agreed to live in a reciprocal relationship, sharing their resources with the alnokak (human beings). Many non-human beings were considered to be both relatives and ancestors; Wobanaki traditions include an origin story in which human beings were created out of the ash tree.

The hills of the Pocumtuck Range, known as Pemawatchwatunck to the Pocumtuck people, take the shape of a giant beaver in traditional Native stories. The head of Ktsi Amiskw, the giant beaver, was called Wequamps, meaning a place where a hill drops off abruptly.

Photo by Marge Bruchac.

Some of the oldest oral traditions recount how, in ancient times, ice pushed the land into mountainous formations before melting away to water. In Missisquoi territory, one story recounts how Odzihozo, a creature made of ice and dust, formed Petowbowk, the Lake now called Champlain. In Pocumtuck territory, another story relates how the valley was formed by the work of a giant beaver who built a dam, flooded the valley, and who was then turned to stone by Hobomock. His body is the mountain range, Pemawatchwatunck, now called the Pocumtuck range, and his head is Wequamps, now known as Mt. Sugarloaf. Every place had words attached to it, and these oral traditions, or deep-time stories, along with detailed knowledge of the landscape and trails and resources, were passed on from the very old to the very young. Some traditions told about times when certain kinds of animals – the megafauna – were killed by human or superhuman creatures. Other traditions recounted wars and battles, allies and enemies. All of these oral traditions helped people to learn the geography of their homeland and recall tribal history.

Wobanaki Family Life

Wobanaki families were egalitarian, rather than hierarchical, and gender roles were relatively flexible – men and women both participated in hunting, fishing and foraging activities. Both women and men also served as chiefs or sachems and leaders of societies and skill groups. There were some activities and skills that were exclusive to men and women, and there were also specific traditions and practices to do with transitional times in life, such as puberty, marriage and menopause. Marriages were easily dissolved if partners proved incompatible.

Wobanaki children were transported by cradleboard when very young, and encouraged to join in adult activities as soon as they could walk. They learned from all the other members of the community, and children were often sent to live with aunts, uncles, or grandparents, where they could learn specific kinds of skills by working alongside their elders. All members of closely-knit extended family groups took responsibility for the care of orphans, the sick, and the elderly.

Elders guided by example and encouragement rather than by force, and anyone could influence family and group decisions by withdrawing support or refusing to participate. In general, a high value was accorded to personal skill, honor, and independent thought. Inheritance gifts and abilities, no matter how unusual, were encouraged, regardless of sex or age. Whenever anyone, adults or children made mistakes, insulted one another, or otherwise misbehaved, lesson stories, or, at worst, nicknames, were used to encourage them towards better behavior.

Life was very social, with time spent formally and informally visiting relatives and friends, gathering for celebrations, and sharing stories. Storytellers would regale their listeners with tales that were, by turns, humorous, tragic, and
scandalous, about the almost unbelievable activities and powers of human and non-human tricksters and shape-changers. There were songs and dances for many different occasions, including, but not limited to, healing songs, friendship dances, greeting ceremonies, bartering masquerades, lullabies, and dramatic renditions in which great exploits were re-enacted. There were also dances and other special preparations for war and for the treatment of captives, including the infamous running of the gauntlet. Captives who showed promise, or skill, or wit, were very likely to be adopted into the community, where, if they were accepted, they might eventually gain the same rights and opportunities as one who was born into the tribe.

Wóbanaki people had lots of leisure time, and a great deal of skill, to make beautiful craftwork. They tattooed and painted their bodies, personal tools, and clothing with symbols and artistic embellishments that had spiritual as well as decorative effect. Men and women within each Native Nation developed distinctive hairstyles and decorative dress, so that one could often tell, from a distance, what Nation a person belonged to by the cut of their hair, or by the shape and design of their clothing. Wóbanaki peoples were also great traders and barterers, and they played games of chance and skill at every occasion, often wagering large amounts of goods, and investing a great deal of personal pride, on the outcome of various contests.

Ancient Resources in Ndakinna

Historically, the Wóbanakiak have lived in the northeastern part of the American continent for at least 12,000 years, since the end of the last period of glaciation. Ndakinna, the Wóbanaki homeland, is large and diverse, encompassing many geographies and ecosystems. The homeland stretches west to east, from Bitawbakw, the “waters in-between,” (Lake Champlain) to the ocean, and south to north, from the lower Quinneticook (Connecticut River) into present-day Canada.

Over many millennia, Wóbanaki peoples developed intimate relationships with the landscape and various ecosystems, adapting to climate changes while constantly traveling, building homes, hunting, fishing, foraging, and planting. Wóbanaki peoples did not pen or domesticate any of the animals they used for food, since it was understood that proper hunting behaviors would result in these animals agreeing to be hunted, and these beliefs were reinforced through traditional stories. Wóbanaki peoples did have animal companions, though – the dogs who lived with the people made good hunting partners and scouts.

The most ancient inhabitants of Ndakinna learned to live in a near-arctic environment, moving south as the glaciers melted away to the north. They crafted tools from flint and animal bone, and depended upon the flesh and skins of giant mammals such as the mastodon, moose-élk and giant beaver for food, clothing, bedding, and shelter and boat coverings. Native life in Ndakinna revolved around the animal herds, fish runs, marine mammals, and other seasonal resources. Each Native Nation developed a different seasonal round to make use of the varied resources and homesites within their territory. On the coast, sea-faring peoples harvested great quantities of shellfish, processed large quantities of shells into wampum, and travelled the ocean in skin and bark boats to gather fish and marine mammals. Inland, people hunted the high mountains, harvested from meadows and wetlands, and gathered at large falls on the tidal rivers every year to catch anadromous fish such as shad and salmon. Familiar sites were marked, named, and revisited frequently; specific areas were set aside for hunting camps, sacred sites, ceremonial gatherings, food processing and storage, and burials. Networks of foot trails and rivers made travel easy throughout the territory. Communal areas and sacred places, and the trails that led to them, were considered safe zones to be used by all.

Many different groups of Wóbanakiak participated in trading, hunting, foraging, and fishing across a broad territory. Traditionally, different tribal groups would gather at falls for the spring fish runs, where families worked together to spear, skin, filet and dry large quantities of salmon and shad. Peskeompaskut, on the Quinneticook at present-day Turners Falls, was one of these communal fishing spots. Natural resources were not just passively foraged; they were also actively managed, through such practices as regular burning to clear deadwood, produce pasture, and encourage the growth of nut trees and fresh browse.

Wóbanaki peoples developed specialized technology, including spears, projectiles, knives, hoes, traps, baskets, bowls, pottery and mat-weaving. Trees provided fuel and materials for shelter and boats, and mosses, fungi, plants, roots, trees, and bark supplied various foods, medicines, and fibers. Lodges or wigwômial (houses) were
constructed, as either flexed, fixed, dome-like structures, or arrangements of straight, moveable poles, which were then covered with bark or woven coverings. Boats, abazolagwal, now generally called canoes, were either sewn out of large sheets of birchbark around ash frames, or burned and hollowed out of large logs to make what are called dugouts. The most desirable homesites were generally situated at river intervale areas, and on terraces, banks and bluffs near rivers, with easy access to forests, springs, and meadows.

The landscape of Ndakinna changed gradually over time, as glacial sediments and alluvial flooding beside large rivers like the Quinneticook created rich soil for growing cultivated crops. Periodic burning of the underbrush kept forests passable, and encouraged the growth of nut trees and berry bushes. Wobenaki peoples did some farming in addition to all the hunting, foraging, and gathering of wild resources. The archaeological evidence indicates that between 9,000 - 5,000 years B.C.E. (Before Current Era), Native peoples were already harvesting large quantities of wild grains, seeds, nuts and roots like chenopodium, sunflower, butternuts and Jerusalem artichoke.

By around 1200 C.E. (Current Era) skamon (maize or corn) was imported from tribes to the southwest, and this crop, along with beans and squash, was being planted in gardens at particular locations throughout Ndakinna. The use of corn didn’t stop the practice of seasonal hunting and fishing throughout the homeland. Wobenaki cornfields were cleared and planted by all members of a community during the spring, under the guidance of the women. The fields were then left, either to themselves, or with only a few families to tend them, while other tribal members continued moving to other sites during the seasonal rounds. In coastal communities, people also made use of the annual fish runs of shad and herring to fertilize their corn fields. By 1600, the Pocumtuck were growing fairly large quantities of corn beside the Quinneticook and Pocomtuck Rivers, and Pine Hill had become a central storage site for winter supplies of corn.

Political Organization

Politically, Wobenaki communities were organized around families, extended kin groups, bands, and tribes or Nations. Certain highly skilled individuals, families, and societies were nurtured, or chosen, to organize group religious activities, coordinate political actions, teach particular skills, transmit sacred knowledge, and monitor access to certain territories. Socially, the smallest unit of organization was the family band, a group that maintained an attachment, not to one fixed dwelling place, but to a range of resource-gathering sites within the homeland. Extended family groups maintained connections to tribal groups, and demonstrated political and military power through clans and through participation in rituals, ceremonies, and warfare. Strategic alliances were often arranged through intermarriages across clan and tribal groups, or between different Native Nations. Although there were many different political alliances among the Wobenaki, there was not one over-arching formal alliance that governed all the culturally related or geographically adjacent Nations. People maintained a great degree of personal freedom and family autonomy as they circulated within their homelands.

Symbolically, control of the territory that constituted a tribal homeland could be vested in traditional Native leaders, called chiefs, or sachems, and these leaders, who might be either male or female, organized group resistance against enemies who trespassed on Native lands. There was not just one sachem for each Native Nation; each family or extended family had its own sachem, and each Nation had dozens of sachems, in addition to leaders of medicine and other societies who also exercised control over group decisions. Wobenaki peoples often “voted with their feet,” by moving away from, or refusing to follow, disagreeable political leaders. When Native Nations were at war with one another, they generally fought to gain political control, personal power, or vengeance rather than to claim outright ownership of another tribe’s territory. Ideally, losers would be put in a position where they would be forced to support the winners by paying tribute or supplying food and resources.

Wobenaki traveled and traded regularly with other Algonkian Indian peoples across the northeast, including Wampanoag and Narragansett peoples in southern New England, Mohican peoples in the Hudson River valley, Innu (Montagnais) peoples in the north, and Anishnaabe peoples as far west as the Great Lakes. Tools, seeds, furs, craftwork and other resources were all part of a vast exchange network that reinforced inter-tribal alliances. Those alliances often determined where people could seek refuge or help in times of war. The dependence on reciprocal trading relationships and gift-giving, combined with inter-tribal social and political gatherings, also helped ease potential hostilities between Native Nations.

Further Reading