

Malian's Song – *Linguistic Notes and Ethnographic Terms for Abenakis*

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Wôbanakiak = Abenaki Indians

Wôbanakiak – Abenaki Peoples – Wabanaki Confederacy

Abenaki is a common generic term for the Native American Indian peoples of northern New England, southeastern Canada, and the Maritimes. These peoples are also known as *Wabanaki* (Eastern Abenaki – Maine and the Canadian Maritimes) or *Wôbanakiak* (Western Abenaki – New Hampshire, Vermont, and southeastern Canada). In the Native language *Wôbanakiak* roughly translates to mean “*People of the Dawn.*”

The name *Wôbanakiak*, is created from the morphemes for dawn (*wôban*), and land (*aki*) combined with the animate plural ending (*-ak*) to indicate those people who dwell in that place. (The nasalized “ohn” sound in Abenaki is variously spelled as *ô* or *8*.) During the 15-1600s, English, French, and Dutch mispronunciations of *Wôbanakiak* resulted in the variant spellings found in colonial and contemporary records. These include the English/Dutch *Abnaki* (with a hard “a” sound), the English/French *Abenaki* (also with the hard “a” and stress on the first syllable), and the French *Abénaquis* (pronounced “Ah-behn-ah-ki” with a flat “e” and stress on the second and final syllables, following French conventions). All of these variant pronunciations are still in use today.

The *Wabanaki Confederacy* today includes two tribes of the *Passamaquoddy Nation*, one tribe of the *Penobscot Nation*, several tribes of the *Malecite Nation*, over 20 tribes of the *Mi'kmaq* or *Micmac Nation*, the *Wolinak Abenaki*, the *Abenaki Nation* and several other groups of *Western Abenaki*.

The *Abenaki Nation* includes the *St. Francis Sokoki Band* or *Abenaki Nation at Missisquoi* based in Swanton, VT, as well as the *Abenaki Nation at Odanak*, historically called the *St. Francis*, and now called the *Odanak Band* by the Canadian government. In Vermont, *Western Abenaki* applies to several historical and contemporary tribal groups, including the *Sokoki* or *Sokwakiak* from Brattleboro, VT to Northfield, MA, the *Coos*, *Cowasuck* or *Cowassiak* from Newbury to Lunenburg, VT, and the *Nulheganook*, *Coaticook*, and *Kikomkwak* of the Northeast Kingdom. The continuously inhabited village site along the Missisquoi River and the northeastern border of Lake Champlain, is also identified in various historical records as *Missisiak*, *Mazipskoik* (in Abenaki) or *Missisquoi* (in French and English).

Alnôbaôdwa – Speaking Abenaki

The Abenaki language is part of a linguistic family that includes all the Native Nations of New England, most of Canada, and the Great Lakes. This language family, called *Algonquian*, has numerous tribal dialects, and includes groups as diverse as the *Arapaho*, *Blackfoot*, and *Cheyenne* in the west, the *Lenape* or *Delaware* in the east, the *Cree* and *Innu* in Canada, and the *Yurok* in California. The term *Algonquian*, or the older variant

Algonkian, seems to have derived from a French adaptation of a Malecite word. The Algonquian languages are linguistically separate and distinct from the languages of the neighboring *Iroquois* or *Haudenosaunee* peoples.

In speaking of themselves and their related kin, Abenaki peoples used the term *alnôba*, meaning a human being, or, more specifically, a Western Abenaki Indian person as distinct from a non-Indian. The term was routinely used by Native Abenaki speakers to talk about Indian peoples and Indian ways in general.

The root morpheme *aln-* translates to “common, usual, or ordinary.” It appears in terms that distinguish between Indian and non-Indian things or practices, like *alnôbaiki* = Indian land (with the suffix *-aki* = land), *alnôbaôdwa* = to speak Indian (with the intransitive verb *odoka* = speaking, used here as a suffix), and *alnôbaiwigwôm* = Indian house (with the attached noun *wigwom* = house). The noun ending that indicates animate plural is *-ak*, as in *awaasak* (animals), *namasak* (fish) or *abasiak* (trees). The plural for *alnôba* is *alnôbak* (the final *a* is dropped when adding *-ak*).

Indians and Native Americans

There are several general terms used for the indigenous peoples of the Americas today, including *Indian*, *American Indian*, *Native American*, *Native American Indian*, *First Nations*, and *Native*, just to name a few.

The term “*Indian*” is often said to have originated with Columbus’ claim to have discovered an alternate water route to India. But since India at the time was called “*Hindustan*,” and Columbus was following maps made by earlier explorers, it is more likely that he pretended to have reached the East Indies, a place rich in spices. The descendants of the Taino and Awarak people who met Columbus say they were called by the Spanish term “*in Dios*” meaning “people of God.” In Central and South America today, Native people are called “*indios*” or “*aborigenes*,” meaning the original people. The labels “*American Indian*” and “*Native American*” are historical misnomers, since “*America*,” named after Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, was a series of European colonies that took over Native territories, none of which were ever called “*America*” before European settlement.

Other terms commonly found in historical documents include the pejorative English “*savage*,” or French “*sauvage*,” meaning “wild and untamed.” Many Europeans still use the phrase “*Red Indians*” to distinguish the indigenous peoples of the Americas from the indigenous peoples of the subcontinent of India. On this side of the ocean, both “*Red Indian*” and “*Redskin*” are considered insulting archaic terms.

The term “*Native American*” was actually first coined by white New Englanders, in the 1840s – 80s, who formed political associations with the goal of removing all people of color from American society, by sending African Americans back to Africa, Irish back to Ireland, and Indians to reservations out west. These Yankee politicians called themselves “*Native Americans*,” since they felt that America was their homeland. The English term “*Native*” specifies anything born in, or originating in, a particular place.

As colonial expansion spread westward, Indians were put under increasing pressure to sign treaties and relinquish aboriginal rights, and were encouraged, or forced, to adopt American citizenship and education and culture if they, too, wanted to be called “Americans.” Some tribes openly refused US citizenship; others were treated as wards of the state; some maintained tribal governments out of view of federal and state officials; still others maintained a government to government relationship with the United States. After various forced removals, relocations, struggles and dispossessions throughout the 19th century, Indian tribes in the 20th century were given the option to petition the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to establish federal recognition and exercise tribal sovereignty. The BIA and many government programs today distinguish between “*recognized*” and “*unrecognized*” tribes based on criteria contained in these petition decisions. Many of the northeastern tribes, despite their long presence in their traditional homelands, have not yet been acknowledged with formal recognition by the federal government.

During the civil rights movements of the 1960s – 70s, many of America’s indigenous peoples claimed the term “*Native American*” as a political statement, since they knew that their ancestors, and not the white people, were the original inhabitants of the continent. In academic, educational, and journalistic writings, this term is now interchangeable with “*American Indian*.” In United States legal documents, Native peoples are still technically “*Indians*.” “*Indian*” is also the name most commonly found in historical documents, tribal names, social organizations, and federal programs. Common 20th century pronunciation of the term by Native peoples has led to a new form of spelling - “*Ndn*” - , while the 19th century pronunciation - “*Injun*” - is generally considered to be archaic and insulting. Since there are so many different “*Native American Indian*” peoples, it is considered most respectful, when speaking of a particular Nation, to refer to them by their tribal name.

The term “*Native*” may be the English word that perhaps comes closest to the indigenous meaning of *Wôbanakiak*, since it refers to a person who originated in a particular place. In that sense, the “*Indians*” are the true “*Natives*” of the place we now call “*America*,” a place that most Native peoples, and some historians, also familiarly call “*Indian Country*.” Here in the northeast, where at least 10,000 years of Abenaki occupation has been documented, the state we call “*Vermont*” is also known to Abenaki peoples as “*Ndakinna*” meaning “*my homeland*.”