

A TRIPARTITE POLITICAL SYSTEM
AMONG CHRISTIAN INDIANS OF EARLY MASSACHUSETTS

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In seventeenth century colonial Massachusetts there existed for a brief but memorable period about twenty towns of various size and success inhabited entirely by Christian Indians. These towns of converts were islands in a sea of opposing currents, for unconverted Indians scorned them, and untrusting English opposed them. The towns and their inception is a story in itself (see Harvey [MacCulloch] 1965:M.A. thesis); but it will suffice here to note that in the established Indian towns the inhabitants dressed in English clothes, were learning or already practicing their "callings" or trades, and were earnest Puritan church-goers. They were able to read and write in Indian (and some in English), took logic and theology courses from Rev. John Eliot in the summer, and sent their promising young men to the Indian College at Harvard. Furthermore, they had extensive farmed land, livestock, and orchards, and participated in a market economy with the somewhat incredulous colonists. The picture, in short, was not the one usually described in grammar school history books of the red savage faced by the colonists.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Praying Towns, as they were called, was their unique political system, made up of the English colonial and the traditional tribal systems; and superimposed on both of these was a biblical arrangement straight out of Moses. In order to fully appreciate this tripartite political system some background information about the native and colonial systems is helpful.

The Algonkian Indian tribes of Southern New England, which, in general, shared similar systems of political organization, had as their head a man called the Sachem. His position was hereditary, he usually being the eldest son of the preceding Sachem--or in unusual cases, the nephew or younger brother. His position, though powerful, was not that of a true monarch, for his powers were limited and his influence depended largely on the allegiance of his followers, based in turn on his own beneficence and ability. Though his opinions and supernatural visions were highly regarded and influential, he made no major decisions concerning the tribe without the concurrence of the council of his important men. On this council, among others, were the Sagamores, who, as the colonists put it, were "like unto petty governors." There were approximately twenty Sagamores in a tribe, and they headed up the different tribal districts and villages. They were from the same class (clan?) as the Sachem, and their position was also hereditary. They had considerable autonomy, and differed in importance according to the size of their territory and numbers of followers. All, however, were subject to the Sachem. Also on the Sachem's council were: his Missinege (as he was called among the Mohegans), or war leader; the tribal warriors; and the Powwows, who were wise men and shamans. The Sachem and Sagamores had definite duties and obligations, especially in the realm of law and justice. The Sagamores handled local cases of a general nature, while the Sachem reviewed the more serious cases. The Sachem literally acted as judge, jury and executioner, meting out punishment as required. These hereditary leaders also had obligations to see to the

maintenance of the aged, widowed, orphaned or maimed of the tribe. This was accomplished through the collection of a tribute of foodstuffs, gathered from every able member of the tribe at the close of harvest. This tribute also financed the entertainment of guests of the Sachem or Sagamore, and the upkeep of the leaders themselves. They were free to request any amount of tribute, though the fact that their followers would go elsewhere if they became too oppressive served to keep their ambitions in check.¹

This, in brief, was the political system of the Indians who joined the Praying Towns.

In the villages and towns of the Massachusetts Puritans the political machinery was the servant of God and Church. Despite schoolbook eulogies to religious freedom and separation of church and state by our pilgrim fathers, the fact is there was neither in the early days of the colony. As Smelser (1950:78) says: "In Massachusetts Bay, which was the most populous of the New England settlements, only freemen voted and held offices in the seventeenth century, only church members were freemen, and only men approved by the clergy were church members--hence the use of term 'theocracy' to describe their government." Town meetings were held to deal with local affairs and to expedite matters between these meetings; selectmen were elected to an executive committee. Also elected were constables, town clerks, tax assessors, and three freemen to determine small claims. For the eligible (i.e. church members), voting was direct, rather than accomplished through representatives (Wertenbaker 1947:69-72; Haskins 1960:34-36). Above and beyond the local scene were magistrates, the governor who owed his allegiance to the throne (though the ties grew looser all the time), and a two-house legislature--one house with appointed, and one with elected members (Smelser 1950:78).

These, then, in very brief form, were the Indian and Colonial political systems which merged, along with a third, to produce the remarkable government of the Praying Towns.

Taking the story from the beginning: The first Indian Praying Town was settled in the vicinity of Newton in 1646, mainly through the efforts of an exceptionally warm-hearted, scholarly, and linguistically gifted missionary, John Eliot, and a converted Indian leader named Waban. Waban, though not a Sagamore (his father-in-law was one, however²), had gathered under his beneficent wings some rag-tag survivors of a recent smallpox epidemic that had caused widespread havoc in the Indian villages of the colony. His followers were from various districts and villages of the Massachusetts tribe, and other tribes were also represented. Waban and most of his followers became devoted converts to Christianity through the ministrations of Eliot. After several meetings with Eliot at Newton Falls, the Indians informed him they wanted to build a town there and asked him to persuade the General Court to grant lands to them for the purpose. The Court agreed, and in December 1646, the lands were purchased from a local Sagamore and presented to the Indians (Eliot 1647:20). "The Indians who sit downe with Waaubon" shortly thereafter drew up some laws, whose Puritan inspiration is manifestly obvious. Eliot said there were ten laws, but he could recall only eight:

1. That if any man be idle a weeke, at most a fortnight, hee shall pay five shillings.

2. If any unmarried man shall lye with a woman unmarried, hee shall pay twenty shillings.
3. If any man shall beat his wife, his hands shall bee tied behind him and carried to the place of justice to bee severely punished.
4. Every young man, if not another's servant, and if unmarried, hee shall bee compelled to set up a Wigwam and plant for himselfe, and not live shifting up and downe to other Wigwams.
5. If any woman shall not have her haire tied up but hang loose or be cut as men's haire, she shall pay five shillings.
6. If any woman shall goe with naked breasts they shall pay two shillings sixpence.
7. All those that wear long locks shall pay five shillings.
8. If any shall kill lice between their teeth they shall pay five shillings (Eliot 1647:20-21).

These laws represent the first fruits of the political system that had begun to evolve. It is quickly appreciated that the laws were based on the new religious ideal espoused by the Indians and had little to do with the actual ordering of the affairs of the community. Rather, the laws spelled out the new and presumably improved behavior required of everyone. Yet it might also be claimed that the laws served a latent function of emphasizing the common new allegiance which was to bind this group into a functioning body.

Later on in that winter of 1646 another group of Indians (from Concord, to whom Eliot, under the auspices of Waban, had been preaching) also built a town and drew up laws. These laws were more elaborate than the ones at Newton, numbering twenty-six instead of ten. In particular we note number 11:

11. That when Indians doe wrong one to another, they may be lyable to censure by fine or the like, as the English are (Flint and Willard 1647:39-40).

This law shows a growing awareness of the need for general laws to deal with community problems.

Eliot soon realized that there was greater promise for these towns and others like them than he had hoped earlier, and that above all they would need a workable governmental and judiciary system. He brought a motion to the General Court to the effect that some of the most "prudent and pious" of the Christian Indians be appointed as magistrates to handle their own civil and criminal affairs. They were to be chosen by the Indians themselves--a procedure which seems simple enough until we recall that heretofore rulers obtained their positions through inheritance. Election or no, the colonial court was to have the final word; and it is axiomatic that the Indians chosen would be those who most closely adhered to the Christian church.³ In addition to these native magistrates there was also appointed, for the first time, an English "Indian Magistrate" (Daniel Gookin), who was to hold a higher court with the native magistrates to determine matters of life, limb, banishment and divorce (Gookin 1674:178). He was also to distribute "some small encouragement"

to the Indian teachers and rulers. Interestingly enough, this "encouragement" was to come from a 10 percent grain, peas and beans tax, which was levied "at the ingathering of and thrashing of their grain." This, quite plainly, was an adaptation of the traditional harvest tribute to the Sachem and Sagamores. A big difference, however, was that the tribute or tax was now paid to an Englishman who had control over its distribution. (Though this system was potentially open to misuse by the English magistrate, Gookin actually liked the Indians and doubtless did right by them!)

Into this expanding political synthesis of two cultures there was injected still another influence, this time from the Bible. The occasion for this addition was the combining of the two Indian towns at Newton and Concord into one, at Natick ("Place of our search"). Filling in between the lines, we can speculate that solutions now had reached about (1) which of the two town leaders was to rule at Natick, and (2) how authority was to be delegated in the larger group. Eliot wrote (1651:171-172) that a passage in Moses gave him his inspiration for having the Indians choose one ruler of 100, two rulers of 50, and ten rulers of 10. Here is the passage as it occurs in the King James version of the Bible:

- 20 And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, . . . and the work that they must do.
- 21 Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens:
- 22 And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: . . . (Exodus 18:20-22).

And so Moses came to the Massachusetts Indians! On June 6, 1651, an election took place. Waban emerged as the ruler of 100. Two rulers of fifty were also chosen, and finally, ten rulers of ten. Every Indian not elected to one of these positions took his family and stood behind the ruler of ten he preferred to have over him. Henceforth that man acted as his advisor and intermediary in the hierarchy (Eliot 1651:171-172). This system, started at Natick, spread to all the other Praying Towns which succeeded it, some twenty in all. Natick became the center and model town of the Christian Indians; whatever innovations Natick introduced were quickly copied by the others.

Let us take stock here and compare the old system with the new:

Native System	Praying Town System
Hereditary leader.	Elected leader.
Justice administered personally through the Sachem and Sagamores.	Justice administered through elected constables, appointed magistrates, and the legislative body of the colony.
Direct tribute, limited only by ruler's generosity.	Tax established by law, delivered to the English magistrate, and distributed as he saw fit.

(Cont'd.)	Native System	Praying Town System
	Ruler's advisory council, made up of hereditary members.	Consulting officials from rulers of 50's and 10's; other town officials; and over them, the Indian Magistrate, the missionary, and the general court.
	Traditional tribal or sub-tribal territories.	Township granted by the colony; no rights outside this smaller area.
	Citizenship rights by birth.	Citizenship rights by church membership, or at least conversion.
	Considerable local autonomy.	Considerable dependence on the colonial legislature, governor, etc.

An interesting question which raises itself is whether or not the new system of electing rulers broke down the old hereditary tribal hierarchy, so that the most able person, rather than the legal heir, was the one chosen to be ruler. In Waban's case, at least, this change seems to have happened, for though he was almost surely of royal blood, it is stated repeatedly that he was not a Sagamore, and yet he was chosen Ruler of 100. Furthermore, three bona fide Sagamores, present at Natick when Waban was elected (Speen, Cutshamaquin, and Ahatowance), were passed over for the top job. In addition, these three were all converts and therefore not eliminated on religious counts. The facts indicate that Waban was elected because he was an exceptional man, and was appreciated for his hand in the genesis of the Praying Towns. His election, apparently based on merit, indicates that the new system was quite capable of replacing the old. However, a check into the background of the known personnel of the Praying Towns (those named by Indian Magistrate Gookin in his 1674 report), reveals that in almost every other case after the inception of Natick the Rulers of 100 were Sagamores in the traditional system. Besides Ruler, an important and prestigious position was that of teacher; and in almost every case for which there is information, the teachers were closely related to Sagamores; usually, in fact, their sons. (See Table One.) There is also evidence (see Table Two) that a large number of the Praying Town officials were distributed heavily in a few families; though there were some who, as far as we know, were not related to other officials. In any case, the distribution looks suspiciously as though the old hierarchy emerged under the guise of "democratic" elections. Where may we look for an explanation of this apparent paradox, considering the case of Waban?

It would be too simple to attribute the ultimate predominance of the traditional hierarchy to mere custom and tradition (though undoubtedly they also played a part), for any familiarity with the Praying Towns assures one that these Indians were motivated to change innumerable facets of their everyday lives. It is therefore unlikely that they would be unable to change their political system also. In any case, we have Waban as proof that they not only could change it, but did. The answer seems to lie here: that when it came to setting up new Praying Towns, the people naturally turned to experienced leaders in their group, namely the Sagamores, to be the Rulers of 100 in the new settlements.⁴ When the Sagamores went to these new posts, their sons went with them; and by now they had been educated under Eliot's progressive methods. It was therefore natural that the Sagamores' sons should

TABLE I

PERSONNEL IN ELIOT'S CHRISTIAN INDIAN PRAYING TOWNS IN MASSACHUSETTS IN 1674*

(Note: of thirteen Rulers of 100, seven were Sagamores (one Sachem); one was the grandson of a Sagamore; two were related in some way to a Sagamore; and two unknown.)

(KEY: S = Sagamore; sS - son of Sagamore; gS - grandson of Sagamore; Na - Narragansett; Ni - Nipmuck; Ma - Massachusetts; U - Unknown; rS - related to Sagamore.)

Town	Person	Tribet†	Role in Town	Tradi- tional†
Natick	Waban	Ma	(1)Ruler of 100	rS
	Waban	Ma	(2)Ruler of 50	rS
	Waban	Ma	(3)Justice of the Peace	rS
	John Speen	Ma	Teacher	sS
	Anthony Speen	Ma	Teacher	sS
	Piam Boohan	?	Ruler of 50	U
	Weegramomonet (Thos. Waban)	Ma	Town Clerk	rS
Hassanamesit	Nattous	Ma	Deacon	U
	Anaweakin	Ma	Ruler of 100	U
	Tackuppa-Willin	Ma	Teacher	U
	Petavit (Robin Speen)	Ma	Ruler of 50	sS
	Piam Boohan	?	(1)Deacon	U
	Piam Boohan	?	(2)Ruler of 50	U
	Numphow	Ni	Ruler of 100	S
Wamesit	Samuel Numphow	Ni	Teacher	sS
	Awhawton	?	Ruler of 100	U
Punkapoag	William Awhawton	?	Teacher	U
	Wooanakachu (Sag. John)	Ni	Ruler of 100	S
Pakachoog	Matoonus	Ni	Constable	S
	James the Printer	Ma	Teacher	U
	Oonamog	Ma	Ruler of 100	rS
Okkamakamesit	Horrowawenit (Solomon)	Ni	Teacher	S
	James the Printer	Ma	Teacher	U
Waentug	Sasomet	Ma	Teacher	rS
	Ahatowance	Ma	Ruler of 100 (died)	S
Nashoba	Pennahannit	Ni?	Ruler of 100	S
	Pennahannit	Ni?	Marshall General, all towns	
	John Thomas	Ma	Teacher	sS
	Pomhamon	Ma	Ruler of 100	S
Magunkaquog	Waabesktamin	?	Teacher	U
	Job	?	Ruler of 100	U
Manchaug	Joseph Speen	Ma	(1)Ruler of 100	gS
	Joseph Speen	Ma	(2)Teacher	gS
	Black James	?	Constable	U
Quantisset	Capt. Daniel	Ni	Minister	rS
	Watascompanum (Capt. Tom)	Ni	(1)Gookin's Assistant (2)Constable	Sachem Sachem
Weshakim	Shoshanin (Sag. Sam)	Ni	Ruler of 100	S
	Jethro	Ni	Teacher	U
Quabog	Mautaump (Netamp)	Ni	Ruler of 100	S
Wabquisset	Sampson Speen	Ma	Teacher	sS

*As listed by Daniel Gookin, English magistrate to the Indians, in his 1674 report to the colony, just before outbreak of King Philip's War in 1675.

†Tribal affiliations and traditional roles were ascertained primarily through Drake's Biography of the Indians of North America.

TABLE II
OCCURRENCE OF PRAYING TOWN OFFICIALS IN CERTAIN INDIAN FAMILIES

Names	Position in Town	Comments
I. Awhawton	Ruler of 100	father and son
William Awhawton	Teacher	
<hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/>		
II. Numphow	Ruler of 100	father and son
Samuel Numphow	Teacher	
<hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/>		
III. Robin Speen	Ruler of 50	brothers
Anthony Speen	Teacher	
John Speen	Teacher	
James Speen	Teacher	
Joseph Speen	Ruler of 100	brothers, sons of Robin
Sampson Speen	Teacher	
<hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/>		
IV. Naous	Deacon	father
Anaweakin	Ruler of 100	brothers, sons of Naous
Tackuppa-Willin	Teacher	
James the Printer	Teacher	
<hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/>		
V. Woonakachu	Ruler of 100	brothers
Horrowawenit	Teacher	
Oonamog	Ruler of 100	son-in-law of Woonakachu
John Tahatowance	Teacher	son-in-law of Woonakachu, and brother-in-law of Waban
John Thomas	Ruler of 100	son-in-law of John Tahatowance
Waban	Ruler of 100	brother-in-law of J. Tahatowance
Thomas Waban	Town Clerk	son of Waban
? Waban	Ruler of 100	son of Thomas Waban

become the teachers in the new towns. As teachers among illiterates they were respected, and became well known. It is not surprising, then, that many of these young men eventually succeeded to their father's position of rulership.

Two other factors, both related to the religious aspect of the Indian communities, served to keep the royal families in their superior positions. The first is that in the Puritan churches in general, people were seated according to their position in the community. According to Gookin (1674:183) the Indians at Natick sat in church arranged by "sex, age, quality and degree." Thus the traditional class demarcations were kept distinct. The second factor which helped perpetuate the native hierarchy was that Eliot deliberately sought, especially later on, in new regions, to convert the Sagamores first. As Gookin, who often assisted Eliot said, "When a sachem or sagamore is converted to the faith . . . it hath a great influence on his subjects; according to that old maxim; Regis ad exemplum totus componitur orbis" (1674:200-201). Thus most of the later towns were set up with the newly converted Sagamore as the chief ruler, so that relatively little change was felt in this respect. These newer towns, however, got their teachers and ministers from the more established places, especially Natick. To review then, there were three variations on the theme of picking leaders for the Praying Towns: (1) the situation as it was with Waban, i.e. the choice of an elected leader who was not also a traditional leader; (2) the former Sagamore who was sent forth to create a new town and act as a missionary; and (3) the converted Sagamore who stayed where he was, and who by Eliot's sleight of hand was changed from a Sagamore to a Ruler of 100.

The aspect of tribute serves as a good vehicle to illustrate how the role of the Sagamore-ruler changed in the new system. One Sagamore complained to Eliot that he was not getting his just due from his subjects in the town; but Eliot, on looking into it, found that quite on the contrary he had received more than ample tribute from his Christian Indians. (This seems to have been a personal tribute.) Obviously the problem lay elsewhere, and the sagacious Eliot knew where to look, for he wrote, ". . . the bottom of it lieth here, he formerly had all, or what he would; now he hath but what they will; and admonitions also to rule better. . . ." (1650:141). Obviously, though the personnel of the rulers changed little, the role itself entailed some real adjustments and changes.

If space permitted we could say more of the other positions in the new officialdoms; but that of the rulers would still remain the best documented and most revealing.

Few works have touched on the position of the leader caught in the midst of culture change. An exception is Lloyd Fallers' The Predicament of the Modern African Chief (1955). We might note, then, to what extent the situation of the Sagamore-ruler was compared to that of the African chief caught between two worlds. At first glance there seems to be a great similarity between the two positions. Certainly there were some in the situation. For example, the loss of political independence, the accompanying innovations, the instabilities of the social personalities trying to accommodate two value systems, and the radical changes brought about by the introduction of literacy: all were problems applicable both to the Praying Towns and Fallers' case in

Uganda. Yet the position of Sagamore-ruler was more in keeping with the traditional order of things than that which the modern African chief faces. For instance, the African chief as Fallers points out, is faced with the distressing problem of a true bureaucracy, where all comers, regardless of status, must be treated alike by him. The Sagamore-ruler, on the other hand, was still allowed to distinguish between statuses; in fact he was encouraged to by the Puritan church. Furthermore, there was a greater element of choice for the Sagamore-ruler, for at the time he assumed the new position he still had the choice not to; that is, unlike the modern African chief, he could still find a niche somewhere in the native aristocracy. Fallers' African chief is something of a pawn in a system not of his own devising, and probably often not of his own choice. But the Sagamore-ruler entered into the new system more or less freely; similarly could he leave, and sometimes did. Not least of all, the people that the Sagamore-ruler dealt with were for, not against, the new regime. They had accepted the original premise from which all else flowed: namely, that the English had both the religion and the way of life necessary for spiritual and material salvation; and the fact that the English prospered, had marvelous devices and knowledge, and grew fat while Indians died of disease, was proof enough that this was so. In other words, the Sagamore-ruler had solved his basic cross-cultural conflicts when he became a convert, and so had most of his followers. Therefore he faced much less of the two-way pull that daily confronts the modern African chief. The Praying Towns had their problems, of course, but for the most part they were remarkably well integrated because of the mutual, voluntary commitment on the part of most of their members. Dissenters caused no real problems because they had alternative choices to mission life: to disbelieve but conform; to "get religion" and convert; or to leave. That they were free to choose probably accounts for the fact that they were not a disruptive element in the system, and they added but little to the cares of the Sagamore-ruler. We might venture, then, that the position of the Sagamore-rulers was fraught with fewer cross-cultural headaches than are experienced by modern African chiefs.

We have now traced the growth, in so far as historical materials allow, of the tripartite political system of the Indian Praying Towns of seventeenth century Massachusetts. The rulers in these towns have been studied, and it was found that in spite of the inauguration of an elective system, for reasons not entirely traditional, the rulers continued to be those who would also have ruled in the native system. Finally, a comparison made between the Sagamore-ruler and the modern African chief, as described by Fallers, indicates that the Sagamore-ruler faced a more cheerful prospect at reconciling two cultures than does his modern African counterpart.

Epilogue

The Praying Towns flourished from around 1646 until 1675, when the tragedy of King Philip's War broke out in New England. The vulnerable position of these people--mistrusted by both Indians and English--left them open to personal conflicts, and attacks from both sides. Many died when they were banished to Deer Island in Boston Harbor in the dead of winter with no provisions. Of those who later fought for the English, many died in battle. Large numbers were hung or sold into slavery by wild-eyed colonists after the war, who saw all Indians in the same light. The minority of Christian Indians who fought with the warring Indians left the country after the war, or faced a

dire fate. Those who both remained faithful to the English and escaped their frenzy sadly returned to the Praying Towns which had not been burned (only four out of twenty), and brought some order out of chaos. But the cards were stacked against them, and the grim shadow of disease continued to fall over them as it did their brothers in the land. By 1760 there were only a handful of them left at Natick and Hassanamesit. Eventually, the Praying Towns as entities died out, and another chapter in American Indian history ended on a tragic note.

ENDNOTES

¹For information concerning the Indian government of this period see Bradford and Winslow 1620-1625; Williams 1643; Wood 1634; Travers 1961; and Willoughby 1935.

²According to Indian custom, "royalty" married within its own ranks; therefore Waban, to marry a Sagamore's daughter, was almost certainly of the royal line.

³The court actually had made a real concession to Eliot in granting magistrate posts to persons not in full church membership; this was a difficult status to gain, and no Indian did for several years.

⁴Perhaps it is significant that the unpopular and ill-tempered Sagamore Cutshamaquin never was elected to a rulership.

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