

The Moravian Mission at Schaghticoke: Indigenous Survival Strategies and the Melding of Christian-Indian Ideologies

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Abstract

In 1743 leaders of the Native American village of Schaghticoke, situated along the Housatonic River between the English colonies of New York and Connecticut, invited Moravian missionaries to come live among them. The Moravians agreed and thus began a successful marriage between the two cultures that lasted almost 30 years, despite fierce efforts by their English neighbors to eradicate both. Unlike their British counterparts, the Moravians tolerated Schaghticoke lifeways. Mission records and other documents demonstrate mutual satisfaction in the relationship, with the Moravians saving souls in a modified "Christian" environment and the Schaghticoke leadership maintaining that environment to combat the deleterious effects of English colonialism and promote tribal solidarity.

This paper explores the ways in which Moravian missionaries and Native American leaders negotiated evangelical life at the 18th century Indian mission village of Schaghticoke. Those ways not only introduced a Christian ideology, but used that ideology to strengthen indigenous self-identity and revitalize tribal solidarity.

The Schaghticoke Tribe

The Schaghticoke are a Native American tribe with a 400 acre reservation in northwestern Connecticut, near the town of Kent.¹ The tribe was already residing in their homelands when their leadership petitioned the colony of Connecticut for a reservation - because Englishmen were rapidly encroaching upon their tribal homelands. The colony granted them a 2000 acre reservation in the same year, 1736.² Since that time the Schaghticoke have been recognized continuously by the colony and state of Connecticut as an American Indian tribe.³

The original eastern Algonkian name for the main village of the Schaghticoke was Pishgatikuk, which means "the meeting of two waters".⁴ The German Moravian ministers pronounced it as Pachgatgoch. The English mispronounced it Scatticook (Schaghticoke). The community was located along the Housatonic River south of its confluence with present Macedonia Brook, which was previously known as Scaticook River.⁵ The mission was located at the northern end of the reservation, which was sold off by the tribe's white overseer in 1801 -- against the tribe's wishes.⁶ Present owners have not allowed archaeological investigation of the heavily wooded property, and today only the general location of the mission is known. Our present knowledge of it comes entirely from digging into documents.

Historical Setting for Mission Development in Connecticut

Following the end of Queen Anne's War in 1713, New England was experiencing a time of peace between the French and English. In 1731, New York and Connecticut came to a tentative agreement on their boundary line. These two events triggered an explosion of white population into northwestern CT. Waves of colonists flooded what was once the western frontier, no longer afraid of Indian attack or of losing their farms to New York colony.⁷

Within four years (between 1738 and 1741), seven towns were set up, auctioned off, and quickly filled with Englishmen and their families.⁸ Some of these land transactions are questionable. Others were contracted with Indian communities under duress. For some there are no known deeds. The Public Records of Connecticut contain numerous petitions from tribal peoples complaining about fraudulent land losses or outright encroachment by the English. Here is a 1747 petition from the Mohicans, contesting the alleged sales of their homelands in Sharon, Connecticut several years earlier.⁹

Native communities were undergoing other stresses besides land losses: English farming techniques, hunting methods, & industry were rapidly destroying the traditional indigenous economies of hunting, gathering and fishing. Overkill of game animals and clear-cutting of the landscape resulted in loss of game and their habitats, and of important plant foods. English livestock was allowed to run loose and destroy Native gardens. Streams were clogged with silt due to farmland erosion and polluted by the runoff from mills. English dams impeded the passage of whatever fish were left.¹⁰ Most

demoralizing of all were the huge population losses Native Americans suffered from European diseases and wars.¹¹ Many of those taken were elders with special knowledge of tribal affairs, including political leaders, religious leaders, crafts people, and healers, but also warriors -- the protectors of the tribe, and children, who were its future generation.

Many Native Americans opted to remove themselves from English towns and moved west or north. But many refused to leave their homelands, which were sacred to them. The land was given by the Creator to the tribe. Their ancestors lived and were buried in the homelands. The spirit world revolved about them, and the landscape was filled with objects that signified important events and persons in tribal history, and commemorated sacred stories.¹² And so it was that many tribal leaders sought ways in which their communities could survive the social and cultural upheavals caused by English settlement, yet still remain within their sacred homelands. This was the historical backdrop for western Connecticut when the first Moravian missionary arrived in New York City in 1740.¹³

The Mission at Schaghticoke

Brother Christian Rauch immediately travelled north into upstate New York and founded a Moravian mission at the Mohican village of Shekomeko near present Pine Plains in eastern New York. Around this time, the Schaghticoke sachem Mauwehu and other tribal leaders petitioned Connecticut for an English minister and school. Connecticut sat on its hands and so in January 1743 Mauwehu visited the Moravian Brethren at

Shekomeko and invited them to set up a mission at Schaghticoke. The Moravians accepted the invitation, and a mutually satisfying relation between the brethren and tribal members continued for 28 years, when their hostile English neighbors succeeded in forcing the Moravians to finally withdraw to their center in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.¹⁴

Soon after Mauwehu's invitation, the Moravian minister Johan Martin Mack and his wife Johanna moved to Schaghticoke. Several tribal members were baptized, including Mawehue, who was given the Christian name Gideon.

The Moravians immediately set about building a church, school and housing with the help of their Schaghticoke congregation. Missionaries' diaries, letters to Bethlehem, and baptismal lists show a successful Christian community with daily services, occasional love feasts, and numerous religious conversations between ministers and members. *7 Schaghticoke leaders held positions in the Church, gave sermons, and "testified" to their love for Jesus and the teachings of the brethren. Hymns were translated into the native tongue. Tribal leadership and many tribal members appeared to have embraced the Moravian version of Christianity with fervor, and the resident brothers wrote uplifting letters of the mission's successes.¹⁵

The tribe's acceptance of Christianity was made easier by the permissive attitudes of the missionaries. Unlike conventional English ministers, they were most accepting of traditional indigenous lifeways. The Moravian ministers lived among the Schaghticoke. Brother Mack and his wife lived in Gideon's house prior to the building of their own.

Some ministers dressed like the natives. They invited tribal leaders to supper and vice versa. One Moravian minister, Brother Post, married a Schaghticoke woman. The Brethren exhibited a high tolerance for Schaghticoke cultural traditions, even those of which they disapproved, such as the matchmaking by older women, lenient child-rearing practices, and the frequent divorce and remarriage of tribal members.

Permissiveness extended to traditional native spirituality. For example, the resident minister frequently called off or curtailed services because Schaghticoke members were conducting sweat lodge ceremonies, such as the ritual cleansing of hunters prior to a game hunt.¹⁶ They also tolerated the presence of a sacred stone monument along the main road across from the tribe's winter village. Stone and brush monuments are traditional indigenous mnemonic devices for remembering important tribal events, sacred stories, and spirit beings.

Christianity as a Tribal Survival Strategy

But why did the Schaghticoke embrace Christianity? Indeed they not only embraced it; tribal leadership actively sought out Christian ministers. The reason had nothing to do with religion and everything to do with community survival. English ministers were white authority figures. Their presence in an indigenous village could prevent their white neighbors from stealing tribal lands and natural resources.

Ministers often set up schools for their indigenous congregation. For Puritan ministers, the goal was to speed up the assimilation process and promote detribalization. Tribal leaders had very different goals, however.

Sachems like Gideon Mauwehu realized that their people needed to learn English language, customs and law to survive within an English market economy and an English-dominated society. By learning to read and write English they less likely would become the victim of fraudulent deeds or be cheated in other business transactions. English-speaking Schaghticoke would be able to petition the Connecticut Court for justice whenever English neighbors stole cord wood or let their animals graze in Indian cornfields.

Additionally, the gospel societies and churches that furnished ministers often provided food, blankets and other material goods for their tribal congregations. Moravian ministers opposed the consumption of alcoholic beverages and assisted Indian leaders in thwarting liquor sales to tribal members. Their anti-liquor stance helped prevent intra-tribal aggression, alcoholism, and poverty due to land and property losses during drunken trading episodes. No doubt Native leadership also believed that, in English eyes, Christian Indians were considered “civilized” and on a higher social level than their non-Christian brethren. Likely, they hoped their civilized status would protect them from the growing racism and social discrimination to which many Indian peoples were being subjected.

These were likely the original reasons that Schaghticoke leadership invited the Moravians to set up a mission among them. Later records clearly demonstrate, however, that many Schaghticoke had become good Moravian Christians and were deeply attached to their resident ministers. Tribal community, cultural traditions, and inter-tribal politics, however, continued to be key forces in the lives of tribal members.¹⁷

In conclusion, Moravian Christianity at Schaghticoke was a potent force in tribal revitalization. Rather than being assimilative, the mechanisms of Moravian interaction enhanced Indian self-identity and promoted indigenous community. This situation is the exact opposite of 17th and 18th century contact situations commonly described in the anthropological and historical literature of southern New England. It calls into question our assumptions concerning Native American acculturation, and suggests the more general hypothesis that some 18th century evangelical religious movements may have helped sustain indigenous societies rather than eradicate them.

¹ When the Weantinock tribe lost most of their homelands to the English in the early years of the 18th century, tribal leadership moved their main village to the northernmost area of their homelands in what is now the town of Kent, Connecticut. Many members of the neighboring Pootatuck tribe, with whom the Weantinock were intermarried, joined them. During the ensuing centuries Schaghticoke became a major refuge for all Native American peoples attempting to escape English domination and discrimination.

² See the Public Records of Connecticut dated May, 1736 in volume 8, pages 38-39, edited by C.J. Hoadley in 1850.

³ Crone-Morange, Paulette and Lucianne Lavin. 2004. The Schaghticoke Tribe and English Law: A Study of Community Survival. *Connecticut History* 43(2): 132-162.

⁴ W.C. Reichel, quoting Schaghticoke culture keeper Eunice Mauwee, the granddaughter of the tribe's first known sachem Mauwehu, aka Gideon Mauwee, in *A Memorial of the Dedications of Monuments Erected by the Moravian Historical Society* (New York: C. B. Richardson and Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1860), pg. 75.

⁵ Barzillai Slosson, *History of Kent* (1812), unpublished manuscript on file at the Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Connecticut.

⁶ John Barber 1836, pages 170-171. Connecticut Historical Collections. *Kent and New Hartford*.

⁷ Crone-Morange and Lavin 2004:140.

⁸ Canaan, named May, 1738 and incorporated Oct., 1739. Goshen, named May, 1738 and incorporated Oct., 1739. Kent, named May, 1738 and incorporated Oct., 1739. Sharon, named and incorporated Oct., 1739. Cornwall, named May, 1738 and incorporated May, 1740. New Fairfield, settled and named May, 1728 and incorporated May, 1740. Salisbury, named May, 1738 and incorporated Oct., 1741 (as listed on the Connecticut State Library web site (<http://www.cslib.org/cttownsy.htm>)).

⁹ See Timothy Binzen 1997. "Mohican Lands and Colonial Corners: Weataug, Wechquadrach, and the Connecticut Colony, 1675–1750." MA thesis, University of Connecticut, Storrs.)

¹⁰ For example, see William Cronon's (1983) *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang.

¹¹ For example, see Kathleen J. Bragdon's (1996) *Native People of Southern New England, 1500-1650*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, pg. 27; Spiess, Arthur E., and Bruce D. Spiess's (1987) "New England Pandemic of 1616-1622: Causes and Archaeological Implications." *Man in the Northeast* 34:71-83.

¹² Lavin (2013), pages 213, 214, 321, 335 ; Crone-Morange and Lavin (2004), pg. 141; Lavin (2011), *Stockbridge Mohicans Past & Present: A Study of Cultural Survival*, pages 23-28. A Scholar-in-Residence Project supported by Mass Humanities, state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, February, 2011; report on file at the Stockbridge Mission House museum, Stockbridge, MA.. Paper presented at the Mohican History Conference, October 8, 2011, held on the reservation of the Mohican Nation, Stockbridge Munsee Band, near Bowler, Wisconsin.

¹³ Corinna Dally-Starna and William A. Starna (2009) *Gideon's People, Being a Chronicle of an American Indian Community in Colonial Connecticut and the Moravian Missionaries who Served There*, Volumes 1 & 2. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, pages 5-6 in Volume 1. Most of this excellent work consists of the diaries of the ministers who resided at the mission village of Schaghticoke, a wonderful window into the everyday lifeways of the members of a mid-18th century Christian Indian village in southern New England.

¹⁴ Dally-Starna and Starna (2009).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ I counted 29 instances in ministers' diaries where sweat lodge ceremonies impeded religious services.

¹⁷ Dally-Starna and Starna, *op. cit.*