

Four Elders of the First Light Talk: Lifeway, Beliefs, History

by Lee Roscoe

The Wampanoag (People of the First Light), like all indigenous tribes of the Americas and elsewhere, provided for themselves from the earth. In order to provide a pleasurable life for all-- weak, strong, old, young alike-- they had to live within the boundaries of the natural world. Or as one elder puts it: "Life was constructed around a relationship of reciprocity with the Earth; each generation ensuring stability for the next seven to come." The spiritual and the material were of necessity two halves of a whole: to honor what sustained you, to treat it beautifully so that it treated the people beautifully in turn. A world of the hands and body in season, a world of complementary male and female, of stars, grandmother moon and grandfather sun, earth, sky, water; the directions, the winds, the cycles of life, the epochs of changing tribal history, all linked to each other through material practice, belief symbols, ritual and language.

Inasmuch as we are on Indian land, they are our hosts-- and they are still here. Savaged by invading civilization, the lifeway has changed, but the spirit of the people remains and they have survived. I do not speak for the tribe-- only the tribe speaks for itself-- and have barely scratched the surface of who they are. This is a people I have admired for decades, who are somehow mythic and very much present, whose sanity in living in communion with each other, and the cosmos-- could set an example for us all. Here is a glimpse.

Linda Coombs speaks

Past Life

Aquinnah Wampanoag, history keeper Linda **Coombs** is a solidly-drawn, handsome woman, a young-looking elder with a deadpan sense of humor. She has been investigating and teaching about her people for about four decades. Retired Program Director for the Aquinnah Cultural Center, she was the Associate Director of the Wampanoag Indigenous Program at Plimoth Plantation for fifteen years and worked there as wardrobe maker, food collector, finger weaver, educator and more for many years prior to that.

"People think that if it's in the past, old, it's not as good." In fact the Wampanoag created effective and deceptively-simple artifacts which supplied them with basic needs, food shelter, energy, entertainment, medicine, fitted from the environment and honed over generations. "We did it for ten thousand years... People don't do things for that long unless they

work," she said, adding, "life was more straightforward than modern society."

Winter villages supported from one to two thousand people, so at contact (between natives and Europeans) population may have been 70,000. A winter house of 100 feet in length might house twelve families and twelve fires down the center aisle. Prior to contact, people traveled from protected inland wintering areas, often near lakes in woodlands, down to summer homes, following watersheds and estuaries. (There was no debt, no mortgage crisis. If natural disaster threatened, the houses could move.)

Each family would set a home in the midst of one to two acres of farmland. A hole was dug and herring put in and the indigenous crops of corn, beans, squash, melons, pumpkins, and sunflowers were planted. "Gourds were planted separately, as they were used to make items such as containers and rattles" -- all with ceremony and thanks. Tobacco was grown and used for ceremony but also for good will: come in, smoke a bowl-- men and women both-- then eat. **Coombs** remembers her grandmother always making room at the table to share the meal if someone came to the door during dinner.

Houses were constructed of "cedar saplings collected in spring." They were very strong. "One year at the Plantation, two men were on top of a frame; one was sprung off to the surroundings; none the worse for wear." Winter houses lasted for a decade or more.

Wide sheets of bark were peeled off trees in spring when the sap loosened it, sometimes so big six people could hold hands around it. Using a peeling tool to help, the bark came off "like a banana peel, but bigger." Bark usually covered winter homes, while large cattail mats were also used, albeit usually for summer homes. They shed rain. Insulating bulrush mats lined the inside of homes in winter and summer. Boiling some of the fiber before weaving created a moisture-absorbing capacity, which damped humidity.

The homes were so warm in winter according to **Coombs** that English colonists wrote of seeing native kids "running outside to dive into snow." With no fire inside, the mats could also help cool the house in summer. Because houses with fires indoors in summer would be too warm, summer meals were prepped "in outdoors kitchens, under a shade arbor."

The women owned the home, for the sake of the children. Were a divorce to happen, she would put his belongings outside of the wetu and he would realize, "Guess I need to move back in with mum." Women did the gardening. "But it wasn't like the single mum of today who has to tend the children and do all the chores. There was plenty of help from aunts, grannies, children, sisters." Camaraderie abounded, whether collecting rushes in summer or beach plums in fall. Women farmed; the young scared off crows and animals, which might eat the crops. Women gathered plants,

which might serve two purposes, that of food, and medicine, as well as dogbane, milkweed, and inner barks of such as cedar and basswood for basketry, bag making, sashes, rope and string. (Flint corn husks of colors such as maroon and green were woven into colored baskets, too.)

Half the time of the women was taken up tanning deer hides. Depending on the size of the women and of the deer, hides were sewn together with deer sinew for garments, coats, leggings, skirts, moccasins, breech clouts.

Describing the process **Coombs** detailed it: First it is soaked in a lye bath of wood ash and water, which opens the pores to loosen the hair. Then the skin is stretched on a frame. It is fleshed with a kind of knife of bone or antler or stone, or during the years of trade perhaps metal-- the hair drops off in clumps in about ten minutes; the other side is also fleshed of its fat in about ten minutes. The hide is dried, becoming rawhide. The membrane on both sides of that must be painstakingly removed. Deer brains are heated in water for ten minutes and the skins are brain tanned for softness. It is rolled, and then re-framed and the water worked out of it with a kind of paddle. Hides were then smoked on a tripod to be softened and waterproofed. The finished clothing would be decorated with paint derived from mineral ores; or embroidered with porcupine quills.

“Fire was a very useful tool. The men might be burning out mishoons, which could be up to 60 feet long and two people wide for fishing and traveling. The women might be firing finished coiled pots which could be cup-sized or very large to feed many people.” **Coombs** claims she can't make a good pot (though she makes about everything else). One of hers had a thick bottom. During a program she waited for it to boil for about a half hour as folks left; finally the polite last few stayed as she took the pot off the fire and it boiled fiercely on its own for twenty minutes. She is often asked what happens if a pot is broken or burnt. “Like any people, they have more than one on hand.”

“Everyone could cook. Some of our best cooks now are men.” Food was mostly stew, but game could be roasted, as with gutted and flattened fish. Stews thickened with corn meal and beans could simmer with meat, berries, squash or fish. Hazel or walnuts might create gravy. “Cornbread was made by mixing the meal with hot water, wrapped in husks, and baked in the ashes of the cook fire; or shaped into small cakes and dropped into boiling water as dumplings.” White oak acorns made delicious flour.

“English misinterpretation of men's work depicted them smoking their pipes and sitting around. Not true.” Men were to provide the meat. Indeed to marry, a woman's family might ask a man to provide for a period of time to ensure that he would be a good husband. Fishing in salt and fresh water, and hunting deer and black bear, small game and birds in Wampanoag territory, with an occasional moose or elk further north took place in each season for

whatever was available. Men needed to be in top physical and mental condition; acute sensory powers were crucial to hunting and to survival.

Men created objects such as quivers, arrows, and bows, six feet tall of hickory, maple or ash with a sixty-pound pull. Fishing implements included bone, antler, wood and even copper hooks. There were lines but no rods. There were weirs and nets. While men fished women shell-fished. Men honed axes to chop wood, and created woodworking tools such as adzes. They pecked and flaked basalt, felsite, quartz, finished to shape by using sandstone or the grit of water and sand. Tools in turn created beautiful ladles and bowls from hard burls, oft decorated with crows, deer or duck heads; small dishes could be attached to your belt, "so there would be no arguments on who had to do the dishes."

War clubs emerged from one piece fashioned from the trunk and the root-ball of a tree. "Were your people warlike or peaceful?" is a question that drives me crazy," **Coombs** says. "Like any people we were both. There are times when anyone fights for one's people or life, and life way. For us the goal was not the complete subjugation of a people when we fought but to negotiate peaceable relationships as a result... Built into the culture was the idea of establishing good relations. We sought consensus; hashing out sometimes for days. The majority rule didn't work for us, because a minority is always unhappy. Peace was built into the society. For the sake of the kids."

Far more than war, "There were huge trade networks. Goods would make their way from many areas. We found jasper arrowheads at Plimoth Plantation from Pennsylvania for instance. Copper found in small amounts locally was mostly traded though from the Great Lakes regions. Again it was not the goods which were important per se, but the good relations trade established." (Folks would barter amongst each other; maybe someone who was a skilled potter might trade with someone who made great baskets, and so forth.)

Each material reality was paired with ceremony, and each ceremony **Coombs** says, with a fire. "The fire-keeper made sure no bugs died by flying into the flames during the ceremony." Ceremony gave respect and prayer to Creation.

Then came the Europeans. Before them, **Coombs** says, the Wampanoag confederacy included sixty-nine tribes and many clans, from roughly Marshfield/Weymouth west through Taunton, Middleboro and North Attleboro to Rehoboth, Fall River through the eastern side of Rhode Island down through Bristol to Aquidneck and the bay, and east to include all of the Cape and islands, bordering the territories of the Narragansetts and Massachusetts. Village names were based on descriptions such as cleared fields, a small stream, a crossing-over place, a fresh water or salt marsh.

Prior to 1620, European sailors from many countries had been coming to the area for a hundred years, fishing and also kidnapping natives for exhibit back home. "That was the beginning of colonization for us," she says, adding, "that's what happens when one people treats another as if they are not human beings." She says that the English came with the specific intent of settling and getting land. They had an agenda, and they followed through on it. "Part of the process of colonization was religious conversion, part an educational system such as established Harvard and Dartmouth. They wanted to change us or clear us out."

Notably Europeans brought new diseases for which indigenous people had no immunity. In 1616 plague brought across the seas devastated a swath of Wampanoags, leaving them vulnerable to the Narragansetts adjacent to them, who demanded tribute. But the sachem Ousemequin (Yellow Feather) the massasoit (great leader) of the confederacy, wanted none of it. "Ousemequin was the sachem of the village of Pokanoket, now Warren and Bristol, R.I. Circa 1620, he had many villages allied under him, presumably in regard to Narragansett. Each of these villages, however, had their own sachem, whose position or power Ousemequin did not usurp." He chose "to make a political alliance with the newly-settled English in his efforts to resist Narragansett goals of extracting tribute."

Ramona Peters takes up the tale of history where Coombs left off.

With long eyes colored of earth and sky, a mellifluous voice, she has a wolf-intense presence honed by thousands of years of ancestors standing on the sovereign land in which she was born as a Mashpee Wampanoag. Medicine and history keeper, artist, the director of the tribe's Native Artifacts and Graves Repatriation Act (NAGRA) program, recipient of Tribal People's Fund Community Spirit award-- we spoke on an August day on which the sun had seemed to lose patience with humans.

My people have been here since the last glacier receded, 12,000 years ago, she tells me. That they came over the Bering Straits land bridge is not true. "A few people may have entered that way, but that was convenient story created by an American president," Peters says. "We came before the ice opened. There were people already here; then other people joined us."

For thousands of years they had self-rule; then came land fraud, land grabs, indenture, "taking our children away, taking trees, constantly harassing us, beating us."

Just before the Revolution a Wampanoag, Reuben **Cognehew**, was sent to England with a formal complaint about the people's treatment. "We'd been issuing complaints since people started settling. Their animals, pigs, horses, cattle destroyed crops and clam beds. The incoming people never had any land ownership in England, so this is the place" (she smiles) "where real estate was created. Their version of ownership did not fit us culturally."

Peters says the king gave the natives self-rule one year before the Revolution. She wonders if it gave the colonists ideas of independence. But the king's edict was pretty much out the window after the Great War when the new Americans took over.

So for 200 years "we were a reservation." The Mashpee Plantation, which lasted from the 1600s to the 1800s with overseers in one form or another, was in large part due to making the tribes into Praying Indians.

"Each incoming president gets to set new Indian law, even **Obama**. They have tried to acculturate us, assimilate us, and exterminate us." **Nixon** asked for self-determination with assistance; which aided her in going to the University of Arizona as part of a pilot program to create teachers and role models to return home to their people.

In spite of everything, the Wampanoags had maintained a high degree of self-sufficiency, unlike many others across the country removed and put on reservations and made to become dependent on the state. In 1834 a report from an investigator from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts said that the Mashpees could exist on the fowl, shellfish, lobsters of the seashore, on the large fish in the salt bays, on the trout and herring in the streams. Even in 1870 when Mashpee was forced to incorporate into a township by the state in spite of the tribe's vote of no, the people kept together.

Indeed, from the seventeenth century through now in addition to being whalers, broom makers, cranberry farmers, traders of fur, rope, timber, sassafras, and smoked herring, and now part of the professional community at large-- construction and health workers, teachers, journalists, selectmen, and lawyers-- the people always fished, hunted and gardened.

Peters says that all the development, which came in the 1970s "was like having ships land on the shore." The new people "figured out we were in control, so they changed town meeting," voting in selectmen who were pro-development. "They took the town over."

But the 1970s also were a time for good change. "Prophecy predicted a very difficult time, but then a mending, an assistance to have us come back." From the Pacific Rim and all over the world she saw it begin. (She has visited seventeen countries and many indigenous nations.)

I ask if the interest of the supra culture in the 1970s contributed to a renaissance of interest by the first peoples in their own ways. There is the "ancestral world and the American world." She continues, "Native World, Indian World doesn't really pay attention to the outside world. It's almost funny. We don't notice," she says, adding, "This includes the natural world to which we are connected, not just for food, but the life forces which are joined with us."

In the 1970s Ellsworth **Oakley**, **Drifting Goose**, reorganized the people into five sub-tribes, Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, Wareham to

Middleborough, New Bedford to Rehoboth. Similar boundaries as in the past, but now of some 2,300 people, 1400 in Mashpee.

In the 1970s, too, Amelia **Peters Bingham** and Chief Earl **Mills** (Chief **Flying Eagle**) helped initiate land claims and Federal Recognition for the Mashpees. In 1987 the Aquinnah Wampanoags received Federal Recognition.

In 2007, the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe was recognized as a legal, sovereign entity. This creates funding for health, education, housing. (Some friends told me, "We don't need the government to tell us who we are.") But **Peters** says, "We need it to protect the land and water. Though we (maybe) helpless to do that as are any other species which live here in Mashpee." She says there is so much development so close to waterways that they are contaminated. Her people would never build right on a waterway. "If you look at old maps you will never see that." Not that she opposes tourism, but that people who come here should know that visiting is special, a privilege; maybe assigned a lottery as with national parks. She suggests that maybe the space should be assessed for its carrying capacity. "We cannot hold the weight" of so much development. "We are a fragile land."

I ask her how she deals with the anger at seeing her home trashed.

"I went through a dilemma as a young woman. Other tribes wondered if it was our fault; we failed in fending off the invaders; it felt like our responsibility as Wampanoags." She came to grips with it not by complacency but by believing in karma, that actions have consequences. (The concern I voice is that the consequences will strike not just the guilty, but those who had no part in the destruction. We look at each other, silent.)

I ask her about what has been lost.

"Tribal life was misunderstood by the supra culture," she answers, "thought to be socialist because it was redistributive, so ceremony was feared. Our public ceremonies were outlawed. This is terrible because the community needs certain ceremonies to stay healthy."

Language and the oral tradition itself, the passing down of all aspects of history and learning, was lost, because of the organization by colonizing overseers. To survive, she says, you had to become a Praying Indian. "The requirement was that to become Christian you had to renounce your ancestors; that you had to say why you would never ever be like them." (I have read some of these confessions and they are terrible, forcing people into shame and guilt where there is none.) "It was like Red China. If you were caught praying (in the traditional way), or doing ceremony or visiting a medicine person, people could tell on you. This could cost you a fine, or even your children. Different years there were different laws, some very severe." Yet some saved the ceremonies and lore in secret at great risk. Some of the holdout people who survived without joining the churches were "feared, as witches." Many folks waited "for the patience of seeing the

Christians cease self-proclaiming superiority” over all other people, language and practice. She says in some cases indigenous people are still waiting, among their own as well. She says that Christianized Indians (now mostly Baptists and Protestant in Mashpee) “could be hateful. I’ve seen some very un-Christian behavior.” **Peters** tells me: Many are opposed to traditionalism. For instance, some of the Passamaquoddy are Catholic, and when they were going through their land claims in Maine, returning to ancient ways with the return of the land, the Catholics burnt down traditionalists’ houses.

In 1978, although Congress finally allowed the same freedom of speech granted to Americans by the Constitution to the indigenous people, loss continued. “If someone became angry or gave up and buttoned up their lips. We see this even today with other tribes; someone forgets the songs. You are supposed to know let’s say thirty songs. If you only know six, will the ceremony work?”

Given the vitality of people such as herself and others in the tribe, I ask her if that which is lost can be re-visioned, re-imagined. “Yes. Things can be recovered.” She pauses. “But there has to be the desire. A lot of people don’t embrace the culture. They don’t want to be Indian.”

Today for Peters?

“The lack of maturity has really hurt my people a lot; the lack of humanity, hypocrisy.” ... “American life,” **Peters** says, “needs to mature, to become inclusive and wholesome. It started off with major imbalances, racial and gender.” (She says the matrilineal society of the Wampanoag was always way ahead of the American attitude and legal standing of women. **Peters** thinks some of the still-oppressive attitude to women may contribute to American violence.)

Nosapocket (her Wampanoag name), is tiring. I hear it in her voice. She and her people have just endured a recent suicide of her twenty-four-year old niece. She has been kind to spend time with me under this kind of sorrow. We discuss how difficult it is today for the young-- with the god of economy pressuring them, with no real place for many to be welcomed into the community of man and nature, to become wise and human. **Peters** has been working on an urn as she talks to me. She coils the clay effortlessly, adds it to the wall of the vessel, scrapes it smooth and thin, making the earth itself come alive in a new shape. (Little wonder she is also, adding to her accomplishments, a computer whiz.) Her hands soothe and cycle. The pots which stand in her house express male and female components, are alive with mystery and an ancient force, so much so they make me want to cry before I know of the urn and the death.

I ask a few more questions:

I ask her about creation.

“It is English egotism to call our creation beliefs ‘a story.’ Child-like stuff.”

She gauges me. “Most indigenous peoples came from the sky world or a star, this is the oldest creation. Westerners (western civilization) balk at this. There is a lack of understanding of spirit and cosmos, which are the origins of human being, ocean, tribes... Where does the spirit come from, to understand that is to understand what our origins are.”

The return of the Bear then, is that Prophecy?

Peters nods. Her mother’s clan is Bear. Her sister is **Mother Bear**, clan mother. “For the return of such a totem... Certain things need to be done and to come back.” She will not reveal those and I will not ask. “I saw the great wolf years ago.” It signified changes for the Wampanoag Nation, and that **Peters** needed to participate. She says these appearances are medicine. They indicate that it is “time for us to be able to heal; a positive indication that necessary energies are here to make the medicine real for us.” (She mentions that in some tribes there are clowns. I have read that in other northeastern tribes wolf instructed man in how to behave by enacting all wrong things as a contrary example, as the Lakota Heyoka, or Hopi Koshare, mud people, do.)

I ask: What do animals teach us?

“Sachems looked over regions. The Massasoit listened to what all the sachems had to say representing their area. We learned that from other species. Both wolf and turkey taught us how to live together, to understand and respect each other’s differences and limitations. If you study a wolf pack, they know they may deplete their territory completely if they do not move around. All animal species teach us to be frugal... We all have to eat, everything has to eat. We do that in a respectful way... We even had treaties with animals. We lost our treaty with the whales because not to blame the Quakers (she laughs quietly), but they entrapped us into hunting whales.” (Not for need but for commercial purposes, exploitation.) “Some animals stay with us, some move, leave and come back. We give thanksgiving for the four-legged, the fishes, the birds who chose to be with us again. Our thanksgiving ceremonies express a cycle and level of relationship with these beings.”

In spite of years of oppression, this people has each other and the land. Things are much better today than they were in the past, **Peters** says. “There are times in our history that it has been way more oppressive than it is now.”

Today for Coombs?

In the past, land was taken when debts (often created by the invading culture with oppressive taxes or liquor or other tricks) could not be paid off. But even in recent times, **Coombs** says, in her own family on the Vineyard, records show “twelve individual members of one family lost land due to non-payment of taxes. That struck me as very suspicious for so many in one family to be remiss with their taxes.” Still continuing the new cultural tradition, “part of colonization” of “profit before people.”

Coombs says when she saw a piece of land in Mashpee clear-cut it hurt, it affected her in the gut. As it hurts when you can't get quahogs anymore because of pollution, or no trespass signs, or when development takes more woods for another shopping mall.

“Today we are so wanton. Instead of very precise with lots of presence of mind as the indigenous people have now, and had. We don't think other forms of life are lesser. Even an ant wants his life, as much as you and I want ours.”

“It's important that Wampanoags know our history, the good, the bad and the ugly, to understand what we need and where we need to go in the future.”

“Our people may be away but they return like homing pigeons, particularly at Powwow because of the connection the feeling for family and for the land itself. People always want to come home.”

Earl Mills speaks

Earl **Mills**, elder, chief, former owner of the Flume restaurant, warrior for his people's land rights, author, and one of the human beings I think of when I want to land back at center, spoke to me of belief and ceremony:

He says: It's the natural world, which creates the belief system. For instance the sun was and is important, it's a part of all tribes, whether through the monuments in South America, or here. The sun is part of the planetary set up, part of time and of the skies. Part of the calendar of planting. The *wetu* faces east to the morning sun-- whether the sweat lodge or the *wetu*-- and there is always tobacco burnt to it. And to the directions and the sun and moon. The understanding of the skies, that happened here as well as in Mesoamerica. It was important to survival (to know the environment, the seasons, the solstice)—nature is the library from which knowledge comes.”

Earl continues: So much has been developed, but if you know where to look in some places, such as the Beebe woods, you can still see stones with lines carved on them which point to when and where that sun will be.

He says that of universal significance to many tribes all over the world was the mother and father, mother earth, and father sun. “To me so many

things that are... connected, because that's who we were as natural beings" and these are ongoing. "We were no more important than the animals, the fishes. All were connected, embedded in all of us, everything; whether a hill a pyramid or desert." He says, this is nothing new; aboriginal people everywhere feel the same way. "Look at the Celtic world. The natural world was a way of life. We did not put ourselves above it; it was part and parcel of us... The river ran in their body. The woodland was part of their being. The earth inherently was part of their soul. The rains, winds, four legged, birds, fishes, children, woman, man, part and parcel of each other."

How to carry on through these layers of cultures laid on top of them?

Mills: "It's easy to go back, to recreate. For instance the spring festival, when it is time to plant. You know it because the herring return, the eels and perch, the river-running fishes, catadromous, anadromous, return at the same time as certain things, which grow in the woodlands. This is also the time to plant certain things. So we do a ceremony, which involves those items. And tobacco must be put in the water as part of it. Tobacco is very important. (We were very upset when Sir Walter **Raleigh** and others took tobacco back and used it to smoke, and not for ceremony only.) In the past the *pau waus*, the word powwow came from that, the shamans would talk and create ceremony. We can talk, **we must talk**, about what these things mean to us. Then we must sing and dance. As long as we can keep it going, the aura of the things celebrated and of the ceremony can be kept going. As we do for the fall harvest, the sun, the rain, the great mystery. You talk about it and you dance to it. We have honor songs, dedication songs for harvest, or hunting, for our holidays. We have celebration of sustenance, of the food put on the plate. We put some out for the spirit world. It's who we were and who we are. We get together near a great water of a river or ocean under a particular moon phase and celebrate."

In his book *Talking with the Elders*, **Mills** discusses the use of sage, cedar and sweet grass in ceremony, as well as the importance of the pipe. The pipe is offered to the directions. The smoke, symbolizing in part the spirit through death and life, ascends to connect this world to the creation and the ancestors. He speaks to me in person about a ceremony for getting rid of negative energy; one for death. Pieces of the passed person are burnt so that the past can be cleared. Nothing of archival importance he says, but so the past can be cleared.

Mills says he aspires to stand in good relationship to all. "If strangers come into your midst, it is different than today's world, for native people and to me today, why is this person part of my life? The great mystery sent them, so the stranger is part of the great mystery, and we want to be in good standing with the great mystery: *kiehtannit*" (*kehtean, kiehtan*, he explains: connoting made by no one, spiritual being, pre-empted by no one-- old man,

sea, vast expanse, it makes itself). “Everything had a spiritual name. The connection again-- all beings connected to everything through spirit.”

“I think it’s a healthful, helpful, honorable way to live. With no need for laws. If we are all connected, all brothers and sisters-- brothers don’t kill each other or make war on one another.”

“Manito or manitou, spirit, and tou is of God,” the great mystery. “So if a man was a terrific hunter and brought in four deer, the people didn’t run out and thank him. Instead they would say manitou, manitou over and over again, thanking the great mystery which allowed him to be able to hunt that well; to be blessed so by the spirit world manifested through them so as to be able to do something better than anyone else.”

Future for Mills?

Excitingly, through the visions and efforts of Jesse “**Little Doe**” **Fermino**, the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Program is reviving the language-- **Mills** says, ironically with the help of the Bible translated in the 1600s into Wampanoag by the Reverend John **Elliott**. **Mills** thinks the speaking of the language is important, but perhaps even more so to him, its ability to reconstruct, rediscover, the past beliefs and practices (and their relationship to those of other Algonquian tribes such as Menominee, Anishinaabeg, or Lenape.)

“So much was changed, even our names, and the names of our games, like Lacrosse, not our name for our game. But we were not ever defeated, we just lost battles.”

He says that some believe that aboriginal peoples will lead us back.

Like all people, there are factions and conflicts, but the Wampanoag may be re-emerging into a new circle, a rebirth, a synthesis of past and present; ever thankful for the blessing of the “breath of life,” their strength may reinvigorate all of the community as well.

Food Work

Mills also spoke to me of what anthropologists call “the food quest”-- In 1925 a writer wrote of Mashpee that it had a Sunday peace every day of the week, which had not yet “shamed the fireflies with electric lights.” **Mills**, now in his mid-eighties, was born into that era.

Fowl

Ducks were far more abundant than now: “goose or duck would always be hanging.” (Some men made money as hunting and fishing guides.) Hunters used live decoys kept near the shore, or with the domestic geese in back of the house until laws made it mandatory: no live decoys. So wooden ones were used. Certain ponds were always full of blinds and decoys.

The trick was to know the habits of the birds: to find them on tidal waters and flats in migration, on ponds inland and upland in late fall and early winter when they sought warmer shelter, when they came down to the bays and rivers when lakes were frozen, or to the marsh flats during thaws.

Fowl were also hunted in spring when the larder and root cellar were barer, but seldom in summer-- as many birds and mammals were not hunted in warmer weather when they reproduced. Everyone kept chickens. (There were also pigs and sometimes cows.) Bird eggs, domestic and wild, were jarred in a kind of gelatin, which let them last a very long time.

Mammals

The first deer hunt. It was a time of gathering, of celebration, of festivals.

Mills says there used to be herds of deer, such as are now relegated to Otis AFB, everywhere before roads and overpopulation. Some men "acted like dogs" to lead people to where the deer crossed. Literally barking them out, often towards water.

Out of the inlands towards the wetlands, one man would gather up another one with their dogs, until they had a group heading to swamps for rabbits, catching fifty-to-sixty at a time. Wormy in the warm weather, they were only eaten in cold. Women sewed pelts as gloves or to line shoes, but the leather fell apart. Some say rabbit in ancient times wasn't eaten as he was sacred as a manifestation of Kiehtan, of creation. **Webquish**, also a family name of **Mills's** predecessors is still honored in a local dance used at weddings and family events.

Winter or cold-weather meat was preferred to summer shot game. "Grandfather got to eat things he may not have had all year, such as raccoon." Their warm pelts were used for clothing. Skunk too, was a delicacy after it was de-scented.

In cold weather also they trapped muskrat and mink when fur peaked. Men blew on it to see if it was thick and shiny enough. If a trap caught a fox it was a bonus. Sears, Roebuck and Company bought pelts. Domestic pork was cured in winter, and there was always salt pork around.

I asked about the assertion in primary and secondary non-Indian sources that woods were fired in pre-contact times to create deer runs. But Earl said he had never heard of anyone interfering with nature for this reason per se. No, he said, the men just knew where the deer ran. And maybe they cleared brush off their trails a bit. Firing the woods made desirable habitat for blueberries and released dormant herbs to grow, he said. (And deer like to nibble blueberries.) "My father always set a match to his lands, to clear away the old, make way for new growth. The blueberries are waiting underneath for their time." (Earl comments that he is like that himself. He says he has success in what he does because he leaves it and goes on to

something new. Whether coaching football, or fishing, gardening, writing, or now, photography.)

Fish and Shellfish

They fished in cold weather for white perch, and cod, in warm for fish in season, such as porgy and bluefish. Tautog were speared, diving under the ribs at the right time. Flatfish change guard in winter and summer; they fished for those.

First-year cod stays closer to shore, not making the pelagic migrations the adults do. Even through the World War II years, Earl says, that cod was abundant year-round in the bays. When fish were moving in, families would come down from the inland dwellings in a group, taking a boat owned by one of them to estuary and bay alike. People fished off jetties in summer.

Fishers went to freshwater for lake bass, perch, pickerel, dace, catfish, sea-run trout. Some ponds were "black" with fishes, so many were there. Sturgeon, night-fished by torch light, as well as salmon, were by many accounts also here in numbers for **Mills's** ancestors. Individuals would dig eels out of the mud of riverbanks in winter, feeling into their sides with spears, then smoking them for food. They could be taken the rest of the year, but were avoided returning down river to spawn.

Those most-proficient folks salted, dried and smoked herring from spring runs on wooden rafters and eaves. People would come by for a "stick"-- pointed cedar stuck through the eyes. Kids got a free allocation of sticks; others sold for about ten-cents apiece. Roe sold in jars for about a quarter. They ate and still eat herring-- fresh, smoked, and salted. It was known as Mashpee turkey, and herring-eaters as hogchokers.

In scalloping season, October to March 1, everyone had a knife with them; the women were the best openers. Sold all over the Cape, New Bedford men came with stainless cans for pounds of scallops, too. Oysters were eaten raw and smoked. Though clams were taken pretty much all year as needed when the flats were not frozen, crabbing, musseling and quahogging increased in warmer weather. Quahogging was done, **Mills** says, without plungers, which mess up the clam beds by stirring up sediment. Instead, rakes, tongs, and dredges made of wire baskets were used. Blue crabs were abundant, as much so as in Maryland, **Mills** recalled. Soft-shells were eaten (as they molted, off and on year-round) by the washtub-full. He said the dredging of channels flooded their breeding grounds and limited them, allowing hurricanes and flooding to hurt their brackish bedrooms. (They gathered hard-shells, too.) **Mills** says the blues are coming back.

Some Plants

In spring, **Mills's** folk drank wild herbs for teas. Throughout the year they were gathered as needed and used for medicine. Herbals were

sometimes burnt on top of the stove, on the stove cover itself, or in the oven. An example he gave: dried chokecherry as a smudge against evil spirits. As an antiseptic when illness was around, the chokeberry kept germs out of the house.

Peach, pear, quince and apple were grown in cozy orchards, and every house had not only lilacs outside the back doors but grape vines, harvested along with lots of garden plants, traditional corn, beans and squash and other vegetables as they came in. Some were put by from late summer through fall.

Indian "weedpickers" during the Depression earned twenty-five-cents an hour. Some could pick one hundred boxes a day, men and women, with their scoop pickers and fingers for missed cranberries. **Mills's** brother Elwood Sr. was one of the most proficient, winning friendly extended family berry picking competitions.

Gone?

I asked him what was no longer here and what there was more of in the past. He recapped:

There were beaver in streams, smelts and frostfish. They are not here now. Otter was more copious in inlets and other wetland areas, though he (and others, myself included) have seen some returning in the past years. He says there was more muskrat in rivers and ponds. Scallops too, because of the then more copious eelgrass, were more abundant and mussels, which attached to shells on the eelgrass also grew in larger numbers in the warm weather.

Trapped too, occasionally, were gray foxes around then says Earl, but no longer (or seldom) roaming the Cape. (Earl says he has seen a few.) There were more of the native red fox not yet so completely crossbred with the imported English red foxes. (Hundreds of years ago, a few bears with many wolves haunted the woods which were themselves swamplier, bigger.) There were more animals in each species.

Conflicts

Since the invasion of homeowners broadening the tax base, there have been run-ins between newcomers and tribal members over Mashpee resources.

Clamming in Hadley's Harbor near Naushon, a **Mills** relative was stopped so many times that at last **Mills** wrote out a document saying that by tribal right he had could clam there, signed, Earl **Mills**, Chief **Flying Eagle**.

However, back in the mid-1990s, Mills told me that at long last the judges got sick of seeing Indians in court, and since then pressure has relaxed.

Federal Recognition, Earl thinks, should help to restore ancient rights of fishing, hunting and passage through lands.

Memory, Nature And Me

Leonard **Pocknett, Iron Tree**, whose family has been prominent in Mashpee affairs for over a century, talked to me during a stroll at John's Pond many years ago.

"I am nature and nature is me. So what I do to nature affects me. If we hurt something as far away as China, it may affect something here, we just don't know. Just because science says, 'Oh that's ok, it can't do any harm;' and people with Harvard degrees tell us so, is it so?"

"I grew up in the woods, tramping around in the woods. In those days, Lowell Holly, John's pond, were all places we used as our back yard.

"We hunted, fished, chased rabbits in these parts. In the past years-- and I was away off and on for twenty of them-- returning for vacations-- there has been, I have seen drastic changes. Places at the Mashpee River, running out of Mashpee Pond for instance, show a decrease in water. Same for John's. There used to be the two rivers running out of it, the head of the Childs and the Quashnet. Now you can't see where those places were. It's all blocked by sand. It is because of the houses there. The draining of the water table by the houses."

He pauses and continues, "Fish too, there were pickerel, trout, bass, still are, but there were more of them. You used to sit by a stream see pumpkinseed, yellow perch swim by. Not now. John's pond used to have so much more thicket around the end where it is paved now. We'd go there from school after school was through, for a year-end picnic. We used to swim in water that was totally clear. Around the dog days a slime would come over the rocks, in brown. Parents would warn us not swim. It didn't hurt the fish, but would give us impetigo. Now I see more of that slime more often... And the pollen; there was never so much of it caught in your lungs in Mashpee as now. Probably because there were trees. I have a theory that the trees caught the pollen. Now with the cutting down of everything for malls, there are no trees to hold the pollen, only your car and your lungs.

"You have to be careful what you do, not you personally, but we, all of us, because we don't know the result. I see it like a spider web. You shake the web too hard, a spider comes out, or you break it. Look at how it affects the animals. The coyote come back for a reason. Probably because there are more rabbits. There are more rabbits because there is more area for them

now, than when there were more woods. There are more skunks. Why? Because they build malls, and developments. Cutting down the trees, flattening the place; draining the waters. There has to be a place to release the diverted waters. They build culverts. The skunks like these and live in them. Good for skunks.

“June Bugs. Where are they? I don't see them anymore. Can someone tell me why they have disappeared? Is it the pesticide? We keep sending up satellites. My mother used to say it changed the weather. I never believed her when I was in school. Now I do. We send up jets or satellites, the exhaust or the propulsion to get them up there cuts a hole in the sky.

“We just don't know.

“And snakes, where are the snakes? Fewer of them than when I was a kid and this wasn't one hundred years ago, it wasn't that long ago. Some people may say, good, less snakes, but they have a right to be here too. Science annoys me, just because a scientist says it, does it mean it is true? The science of the day in the past-- well it was this way: they said the world was flat, you will sail off the edge. The science of the day, today-- the same.”

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Clarification:

In the Fall 2016 issue of this Journal, Lee Roscoe interviewed Tribal Elders in the Wampanoag Tribe. The following clarification is provided to our readers from the author regarding the details and precision of the article:

The sentence at the bottom of p. 178 should have read "...kiehtannit" (kehtean, kiehtan); Earl Mills explains it as: connoting spiritual being, preempted by no one. (*Possibly connoting also "old man," "sea," "vast expanse," and "it makes itself."*) I should have explained that the latter definitions in parentheses and now also in italics were not from Earl Mills, but were my own speculation after looking at words and root words in a number of historic dictionaries and at similar belief figures in other Algonquian texts. In addition, the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project has not yet confirmed or verified Mills' or my definitions, words, their spelling, or their etymology.

Correction: (by Judy Needham)

Thank you to Dr. John Bakke, physician and member from Oregon, for the following correction and clarification to my article "DNA and Me", published in The Journal of the Cape Cod Genealogical Society, Volume 6, No. 2 (Fall 2016):

p. 244, second paragraph states: "... mtDNA... tests the X-chromosome going back in a direct maternal line, much as the Y does for the paternal line."