

## **A300, Spring 2008, Writing Assignment #3, Sample Paper #10**

### **Identity and Purity**

As English communities began sprouting up all over America's east coast, cultural interaction between English colonizers and many different Native American tribes became an inevitability. Similar to the Spanish colonizers of South America during the sixteenth century, the English created categories to simplify the innumerable different tribes and people of North America. The English further used the category "Indian" to create a mold with which to shape Native Americans in their cultural encounters. Contrary to common contemporary historical beliefs, however, not all Native Americans had to choose between the English imposed guidelines or violent resistance. Numerous Native Americans used this new notion of "Indian" to create a fusion of Colonial English expectations and Native purity. Natives Americans similar to those discussed by Daniel Richter, were not passive in their cultural interactions. Through adaptations in religion and culture, Native Americans sought to both assimilate to English ideals and maintain their own views of "Indianness" and its religious and cultural purity. The uneasy balance struck by many of these self-made "Indians" between assimilation and resistance dynamically changed the face of English and Native American relations.

Many Native Americans were able to use religion as a way to both accept an important, perhaps the most important, English cultural aspect and still maintain an idea of purity within their idea of an "Indian". An enormous part of the English invasion of America was predicated on the conversion of Native Americans to Christianity<sup>1</sup>. While the English "Indian" worshipped God and was kind and thankful towards the English for their conversion, several Native Americans found that conversion was not so black and white. Native American religion, in comparison to Christianity, was very inclusive<sup>2</sup>. This led many, as with English culture as a

whole, to employ certain parts of Christianity when creating an “Indian” identity. “The same inclusiveness that was so alien to missionaries made it perfectly possible for Native Americans to incorporate elements of Christianity into their spiritual world<sup>3</sup>.” The adoption of elements of Christianity played an enormous role in Native Americans’ creation of an “Indian” self-image. Conversion made Native Americans “civilized” in English eyes and provided many advantages for Native Americans when dealing with the English. Contrary to many stories, such as those of Tekakwitha told by Richter, this conversion, be it partial or complete, was not always a radical shift from the worship of Manitou to the worship of the Christian God<sup>4</sup>. While Native Americans had a difficult time deciphering Christianity’s ties to doctrine, Richter reveals a much easier Native identification with and transition to Catholicism<sup>5</sup>. “Processions, chants, bells, visual aids – all were integral... and all must have at least been recognizable to native people as religious behavior<sup>6</sup>.” Native Americans found in religion a way to bring a part of English culture into their new constructions of the “Indian”. The embracing of portions of Christianity, however, created a new tension within their construction. The Native “Indian” had to maintain a certain exclusiveness from English influence. This purity of self-image, too, was inherently tied to religion.

The religious purity of the “Indian” was essential in both the Native Americans’ protection of their version of “Indian” and their opposition to the English-manufactured version. Irene Silverblatt’s Modern Inquisitions details the importance of “Indian” purity to the Native’s creating their self-image. While full resistance to Christianity could be dangerous, Silverblatt reveals strategies used by many Andean’s to adhere to Christian doctrine while still preserving an aura of piety and salvation toward their ancestral gods. “...ministers simply instructed their followers ‘not to adore saints or receive sacraments with your whole heart, because [Catholic

rites] were just things to mock'.<sup>7</sup>” The worship of ancestral gods created a division between Europeans and Natives. This division was what the purity of the “Indian” centered on. “What had been the practices of Andean living – the customary ways of burying the dead, praying to ancestors...became weapons of colonial critique<sup>8</sup>.” Native American aims at religious purity, then, were successful in creating a *self*-image. Instead of being forced into a European category, many resistant Andeans and Native Americans were able to uphold ties to their own religions while accepting certain assimilations to Christianity as necessary for survival.

Cultural assimilations and resistances by Natives, too, were essential in creating a Native “Indian”, as was the protection of the Natives’ cultural purity. Cultural differences and relations were not new to Native Americans. Tribes of often starkly different peoples had been dealing with one another for centuries before the arrival of Europeans. Though the English lumped all tribes into the term “Indian”, Native Americans, again, chose to forge their own cultural image of the “Indian”. By incorporating their own cultural traditions into their dealings with the English, Native American’s were able to take a more active role in their shaping of an “Indian” identity. “So it seems plausible,” states Richter, “that far from being a youthful rebel...Pocahontas was a dutiful child who fulfilled a very traditional function in native politics and diplomacy<sup>9</sup>.” Richter’s tale goes directly against the established ideal of Pocahontas as the perfect English “Indian” with a complete realization of English cultural “superiority”. In reality, however, her actions reveal a Native American influence over the English rather than vice-versa. Existing cultural ties presented an entirely different challenge for the formation of the “Indian”.

While English influence was greater upon them than it was on the first Native Americans they encountered, Native American’s living in close proximity to the English, such as Metacom’s New England Algonquians, recognized the value of adding English culture to that of

their “Indian”. After the death of their father, Massasoit, an Algonquian king, Metacom and his brother Wamsutta went to the Plymouth legislature to comply with the Native American norm and change their names to match their new statuses<sup>10</sup>. He did not, however, request traditional Native American names. “...[Wamsutta] hoped,” Richter claims, ‘the court would confer an English name upon him’<sup>11</sup>.” Although Wamsutta’s request seems odd, it was essential in the formation of “Indian” culture. Wamsutta and Metacom saw a possibility for the advancement of their tribe. Regardless of its result, the decision to take an English name reflects the attempts of Native Americans to single out parts of English culture they felt would be most useful to their self-image and their flexibility in working with the pieces they chose. “...There was nothing inevitable about the ways in which human beings – European and Indian – shaped their responses and in which Native people continued to adapt their traditions creatively to new conditions<sup>12</sup>.” Cultural interaction, then, was not the traditional dualism of assimilate or die resisting. Native American cultures like the Algonquians used their cultural elasticity to bend the English’s culture as much as the English bent theirs. Purity again, however, needed to be adhered to for Natives to become “Indian” on their own terms.

The importance of cultural purity could not be over stated as that purity helped Natives hold on to local and national traditions, which were essential in their separation from Europeans. “Like the Spanish, they used cultural markings to define and order social categories, but unlike them, the Incas legitimated differences in belief and tradition<sup>13</sup>.” The system of cultural demarcation used by the Incas was not quite the same as the European practice of broad categorization and simplification. The Incan Empire was broken down into cultural units called ayllus. These local communities held the strongest loyalty of Andeans and within them, Andeans were allowed to worship their own ancestors and abide by the laws of the ayllu’s

curaca<sup>14</sup>. The cultural ties to these ayllus were very strong. They were a primary source for defining features of the Andean “Indian”. The Spanish attempted to wrestle control of the ayllus from the curacas, however, the demands of purity upon the Andean idea of an “Indian” showed themselves again. “And Toledo’s efforts to remove curacas from ayllu government were met with such determined resistance that he was forced to abandon his plans<sup>15</sup>.” The refusal to give up their local authorities and divisions shows the importance of keeping the Spanish out. Ayllus were where Andeans developed their strongest and most cherished cultural traits. The purity of these cultural partitions was an overriding need in their rejection of a Spanish category and their creation of a Native one.

Common beliefs hold that the cultural interactions between colonizers and colonized leave only two routes for the colonized to take. Either their culture can be assimilated and eventually forgotten, or they can die while fighting to resist assimilation and uphold their own culture. Andean and Native American reaction to colonial presences, however, tell a much different story. They tell a story of flexibility and the desire to create a Native view of “Indian” free of European impurities. Through the cautious picking and choosing of aspects of both religion and culture, seventeenth century Native Americans were able to create an identity while still accommodating for cultural assimilations necessary to live and thrive with their new neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> Richter, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Richter, pp. 80-81.

<sup>3</sup> Richter, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Richter, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Richter, pp. 83-86.

<sup>6</sup> Richter, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Silverblatt, p. 202.

<sup>8</sup> Silverblatt, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> Richter, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> Richter, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Richter, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Richter, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Silverblatt, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> Silverblatt, pp. 190-195.

<sup>15</sup> Silverblatt, p. 195.