

## A300, Spring 2008, Writing Assignment #3, Sample Paper #9

### Strategies for Becoming Indian

It is sometimes difficult to establish and pursue an identity when there are challenges in the way. This is apparent in many Native American tribes as they began to encounter the European settlers and their traditions. According to Irene Silverblatt, becoming Indian meant for the Native Americans to make compromises and accommodations of other cultures while still maintaining many traditional beliefs. The Native Americans simultaneously embraced and rejected colonial order, which chartered courses of possibility for years.<sup>1</sup> During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many Native Americans made the choice to integrate their religion, names and marriages which enabled them to carry forth with other native beliefs they held close to them. This is shown in the stories of Pocahontas, Tekakwitha and Metacom, which is presented in Daniel Richhter's, Facing East from Indian Country. Although many Native Americans made the choice to give up part of their beliefs to incorporate new ones, there were some who did not believe this was the right course of action.

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, religion played a large role in North America which many Native Americans used as a cultural strategy to incorporate the European beliefs into their own life in order to maintain their "indianness." As stated by Silverblatt, Nativist religious practices were torn by compromise and "could ignore neither the weight of Spanish institutions nor their belligerence to Andean beliefs."<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates how religious practices of the Spanish were fervent, strong and unyielding and the Native Americans had to compromise their beliefs in order to become a part of the modern world. In the story of Pocahontas, she converted to

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<sup>1</sup> Silverblatt, 212

<sup>2</sup> Silverblatt, 199

Anglicanism (the Church of England) and “hastily received a baptism.”<sup>3</sup> This conversion was not to abandon her culture but to incorporate the English into her Native world. Pocahontas was able to make this conversion while still maintaining her Algonquian beliefs because though this was not a free choice and was the will of her Father, it brought temporary peace among the Natives and English.

Similar to the story of Pocahontas, the story of Tekakwitha demonstrates a young woman converting away from her native Mohawk religion as a way to come to grips with the challenges around her. Tekakwitha embraced Christianity by receiving a baptism and refusing to work on the Sabbath.<sup>4</sup> Tekakwitha was able to incorporate this new religion into her life because the native religions were inclusivist and were willing to integrate new ideas and ceremonies into their practices. They were tolerant of different opinions as long as it did not harm others.<sup>5</sup> Tekakwitha had the choice to make this conversion and incorporate Christianity into her life and did so with the ideals of her original religious practices. Although Tekakwitha is similar to Pocahontas in that they were two young women converting to a new religion, they differed in the religions they chose and Tekakwitha chose the religion freely whereas Pocahontas converted because she was captured then forced to by her father.

Although many Native American tribes incorporated new religions into their lives in order to compromise their way into the modern colonial world while being able to maintain other beliefs, there were many who did not. According to Silverblatt, many Native Americans tried to keep their worship pure and anything Spanish was considered “polluting.”<sup>6</sup> This was their hope to establish true “Indian” practices by reconstructing old Incan traditions. These Native

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<sup>3</sup> Richter, 73

<sup>4</sup> Richter, 79

<sup>5</sup> Richter, 84

<sup>6</sup> Silverblatt, 200

Americans' believed that anything Spanish should be banned and even made efforts to suffocate Christianity by removing Christian gravestones.<sup>7</sup>

Like incorporating new religious beliefs into the lives of the Native Americans, the process of changing their names was another way to demonstrate the integration of European traditions into Native American life. Pocahontas changed her name to Rebecca and went to live among the Europeans. She was able to do this because she was not abandoning her Algonquian culture but rather incorporated the English into her own. This was to “make it possible for the Europeans to live in Indian country by Indian rules.”<sup>8</sup> By changing her name, Pocohontas was able to demonstrate cooperation and the need for reciprocity among both the Algonquians and Europeans. Unfortunately, this act of conversion has been misinterpreted and used to publicize the accomplishments of Virginia that many British people considered a place of no profit.<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates the lack of reciprocity Pocahontas was preaching and how the Europeans took the Algonquian's integration and used it only to their advantage.

As well as Pocahontas, Tekakwitha also underwent a name change as a way to incorporate new ideas into her Mohawk culture. When Tekakwitha was baptized in 1676, she changed her name to Catherine after St. Catherine of Siena.<sup>10</sup> This demonstrates her pious attitude and willingness to incorporate new ideas from Europe into a world still of her own making. According to Silverblatt, this conversion demonstrated a “cultural victory by incorporating this new idea and still being able to maintain traditional beliefs, however, was ultimately bound by colonial terms of living.”<sup>11</sup> This is demonstrated by the misinterpretation of

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<sup>7</sup> Silverblatt, 200

<sup>8</sup> Richter, 78

<sup>9</sup> Richter, 81

<sup>10</sup> Richter, 79

<sup>11</sup> Silverblatt, 211

this conversion. Many Europeans saw this conversion as a success story because they were able to convert these “uncivilized” Indians into good Christians and established political influence.

Similar to Pocahontas and Tekakawitha, the story of Metacom demonstrates the idea of a Native American willingly assuming a new European name. Though he did not adapt a new religion, Metacom took in many European traditions and incorporated them into his life as a Wampanoag. This shows that Metacom was not “a rebel of cultural change but rebelled on behalf of cooperation and equal intercultural relations.”<sup>12</sup> This demonstrates Silverblatt’s idea of simultaneously embracing traditions while rejecting others as a way to charter possibility for the future. As Metacom portrayed, in order for many Native Americans to keep their native ways during a European dominant time period, compromise was the best way to be accepted.

Lastly, inter-cultural marriage was another cultural strategy used by many Native Americans to become “Indian” by embracing new European traditions while still maintaining many of their own traditions. In the story of Pocahontas, it was decided after she had been captured and forced by her father, that she was to marry John Rolfe. This marriage served as a traditional function in Native politics and diplomacy because it seemingly brought peace among the Algonquian and English.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Pocahontas had relations with another English settler, John Smith, earlier in her life.

Although many Native Americans believed that inter-cultural marriage was an effective way of embracing new cultures in order to maintain the traditions they held close to them, there were many who did not. As depicted by Silverblatt, Guaman Poma believed that “Indian women were prone to seek men outside their caste, preferring Spaniards to hardworking and honest

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<sup>12</sup> Richter, 105

<sup>13</sup> Richter, 73

Andeans.”<sup>14</sup> This demonstrates how the Native American women were corrupt and did not want to marry a Native American man, but rather the Europeans. Poma argued that the corruption of the social order in the Native American society is because of women. Similarly, many contemporary Native people consider Tekakawitha “a prostitute who traitorously revealed Iroquois secrets.”<sup>15</sup> Not all Native Americans believed the best way to become Indian and maintain tradition beliefs was to incorporate and embrace European ones.

Whether it is Andean, Algonquian, Mohawks, Wampanoag or any other Native American tribe, many Native Americans made the choice to integrate European traditions into their culture in order to continue practicing and engaging in their “Indian” beliefs. This is demonstrated in the stories of Pocahontas, Tekakwitha and Metacom, as depicted by Richter. As these different Native Americans came into contact with Europeans, they made a choice to integrate these new beliefs to continue participating in their own. Although many Native Americans made the choice to incorporate European ideas into their culture, not all believed it was the right choice to make.

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<sup>14</sup> Silverblatt, 205

<sup>15</sup> Richter, 83