

Thanksgiving: A National Day of Mourning for Indians

by Moonanum James and Mahtowin Munro

Every year since 1970, United American Indians of New England have organized the National Day of Mourning observance in Plymouth at noon on Thanksgiving Day. Every year, hundreds of Native people and our supporters from all four directions join us. Every year, including this year, Native people from throughout the Americas will speak the truth about our history and about current issues and struggles we are involved in.

Why do hundreds of people stand out in the cold rather than sit home eating turkey and watching football? Do we have something against a harvest festival?

Of course not. But Thanksgiving in this country -- and in particular in Plymouth -- is much more than a harvest home festival. It is a celebration of the pilgrim mythology.

According to this mythology, the pilgrims arrived, the Native people fed them and welcomed them, the Indians promptly faded into the background, and everyone lived happily ever after.

The truth is a sharp contrast to that mythology.

The pilgrims are glorified and mythologized because the circumstances of the first English-speaking colony in Jamestown were frankly too ugly (for example, they turned to cannibalism to survive) to hold up as an effective national myth. The pilgrims did not find an empty land any more than Columbus "discovered" anything. Every inch of this land is Indian land. The pilgrims (who did not even call themselves pilgrims) did not come here seeking religious freedom; they already had that in Holland. They came here as part of a commercial venture. They introduced sexism, racism, anti-lesbian and gay bigotry, jails, and the class system to these shores. One of the very first things they did when they arrived on Cape Cod -- before they even made it to Plymouth -- was to rob Wampanoag graves at Corn Hill and steal as much of the Indians' winter provisions of corn and beans as they were able to carry. They were no better than any other group of Europeans when it came to their treatment of the Indigenous peoples here. And no, they did not even land at that sacred shrine called Plymouth Rock, a monument to racism and oppression which we are proud to say we buried in 1995.

The first official "Day of Thanksgiving" was proclaimed in 1637 by Governor Winthrop. He did so to celebrate the safe return of men from the Massachusetts Bay Colony who had gone to Mystic, Connecticut to participate in the massacre of over 700 Pequot women, children, and men.

About the only true thing in the whole mythology is that these pitiful European strangers would not have survived their first several years in "New England" were it not for the aid of Wampanoag people. What Native people got in return for this help was genocide, theft of our lands, and never-ending repression. We are treated either as quaint relics from the past, or are, to most people, virtually invisible.

When we dare to stand up for our rights, we are considered unreasonable. When we speak the truth about the history of the European invasion, we are often told to "go back where we came from." Our roots are right here. They do not extend across any ocean.

National Day of Mourning began in 1970 when a Wampanoag man, Wamsutta Frank James, was asked to speak at a state dinner celebrating the 350th anniversary of the pilgrim landing. He refused to speak false words in praise of the white man for bringing civilization to us poor heathens. Native people from throughout the Americas came to Plymouth, where they mourned their forebears who had been sold into slavery, burned alive, massacred, cheated, and mistreated since the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620.

But the commemoration of National Day of Mourning goes far beyond the circumstances of 1970.

Can we give thanks as we remember Native political prisoner Leonard Peltier, who was framed up by the FBI and has been falsely imprisoned since 1976? Despite mountains of evidence exonerating Peltier and the proven misconduct of federal prosecutors and the FBI, Peltier has been denied a new trial. Bill Clinton apparently does not feel that particular pain and has refused to grant clemency to this innocent man.

To Native people, the case of Peltier is one more ordeal in a litany of wrongdoings committed by the U.S. government

against us. While the media in New England present images of the "Pequot miracle" in Connecticut, the vast majority of Native people continue to live in the most abysmal poverty.

Can we give thanks for the fact that, on many reservations, unemployment rates surpass fifty percent? Our life expectancies are much lower, our infant mortality and teen suicide rates much higher, than those of white Americans. Racist stereotypes of Native people, such as those perpetuated by the Cleveland Indians, the Atlanta Braves, and countless local and national sports teams, persist. Every single one of the more than 350 treaties that Native nations signed has been broken by the U.S. government. The bipartisan budget cuts have severely reduced educational opportunities for Native youth and the development of new housing on reservations, and have caused deadly cutbacks in health-care and other necessary services.

Are we to give thanks for being treated as unwelcome in our own country?

Or perhaps we are expected to give thanks for the war that is being waged by the Mexican government against Indigenous peoples there, with the military aid of the U.S. in the form of helicopters and other equipment? When the descendants of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca flee to the U.S., the descendants of the wash-ashore pilgrims term them "illegal aliens" and hunt them down.

We object to the "Pilgrim Progress" parade and to what goes on in Plymouth because they are making millions of tourist dollars every year from the false pilgrim mythology. That money is being made off the backs of our slaughtered indigenous ancestors.

Increasing numbers of people are seeking alternatives to such holidays as Columbus Day and Thanksgiving. They are coming to the conclusion that, if we are ever to achieve some sense of community, we must first face the truth about the history of this country and the toll that history has taken on the lives of millions of Indigenous, Black, Latino, Asian, and poor and working class white people.

The myth of Thanksgiving, served up with dollops of European superiority and manifest destiny, just does not work for many people in this country. As Malcolm X once said about the African-American experience in America, "We did not land on Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock landed on us." Exactly.

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What Is Thanksgiving?

by Thomas A. Ferguson

What do you think of, when asked about Thanksgiving?

We learned from the wisdom of our elders to thank the Creator for; Mother Earth... Father Sky... Grandfather Moon... our Uncles the Four Winds... our Cousins the Stars, and... our Brothers and Sisters the animals. The Algonquins believed that humans were not distinct from or superior to nature, but rather part of nature. We also believe that animals could take human form. Moreover, we believed that a long time ago, humans and animals spoke the same language. Then there was a cataclysm that upset the universe and only a few shaman retained the ability to speak with the animals. We thank the Creator for all our relatives, for what is good in the world, and for all our harvest, not just one crop, but all. We give thanks for the strawberry, it is the first berry of the new spring, we give thanks to the tree spirit, for the warmth it provides in our fires and the saps that flow in the fall, we honor the animal spirit, who laid down its life in order for the people to go on. Subsequently we give thanks for each harvest year round. It is said, when the Creator created the Universe, "He placed his hand on the Whole thing... so everything is spiritual." He never told us to separate anything... but to look upon everything that he has made us as holy and sacred and act accordingly with respect.

The Thanksgiving the greater society celebrates, occurs during a beautiful time of the year; thus, Thanksgiving time means, as Joyce Sequichie Hifler so eloquently writes, ... the first hard freeze, the first spitting ice to rattle the dry autumn leaves. Early morning frost crystallizes grasses in rods of light. The last bit of bright color is gone from the woods... thus; a time of great solitude and for giving thanks for all the gifts provided for us by the Creator, especially for our families health and well being. Thanksgiving traditionally denotes a harmonious time in the cycle of seasons; further examination of the times suggest otherwise. For Algonquins, the beheading of King Philip, son of Chief Massasoit, and the sale of the Wampanoags into slavery has a different connotation than being harmonious. During the time of the Puritans; every Church, every Synagogue, and every Quaker Meeting House was built on money generated from Indian slavery. (Professor Robert Venables)

Not many of our young understand the true history behind this most sacred celebration. Traditionally the many indigenous cultures that inhabited North America gave thanks to the Creator, not once a year, but after every harvest, be it agriculture or game. These celebrations would last for several days. One such celebration happened at Patuxet, alias New Plimmoth, now known as Plymouth Rock, in August of 1621. It is this celebration that many of us were taught to picture as the "First Thanksgiving." This view is based on the mythological concept and approach Western minds have when dealing with the various Native Populations .

There are interesting events leading up to what is termed "Thanksgiving." What is being celebrated in the USA and Canada is based on a mythological concept that must be addressed.

To create an example of this myth, I decided to do some research. I asked middle school, and university students: what comes to your mind, when I ask you about Thanksgiving? Most then gladly answered, in sort of the same fashion: "Some Pilgrims, who arrived at Plymouth, were fed by some Indians," and most of these students had the opinion that the Pilgrims were very religious and both the Native and the Pilgrim lived in harmony. The myth is perpetuated and evolves from the lack of understanding the true history - ninety-nine percent of North America's history is before contact.

August 11, 1620, a cold, and windy night, the Mayflower forced to anchor in the Bay of Paomet, alias Cape Cod. The Pilgrims were traveling to Jamestown, Virginia. As their precursor, Columbus, they too were lost. Running low on supplies, they anchored in the Bay of Cape Cod. On August 15, 1620, religious leaders such as William Bradford and Edward Winslow following a guide book published in Europe by Richard Hakluyt titled Virginia Richly Valued, lead these God-fearing Pilgrims to raid graves.(Mourt's Relation 1622) In the midst of this sacrilegious act they were discovered by the Nausets, the local indigenous band of Algonquins who subsequently chased the Pilgrims off the Cape. This is when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth.

The Algonquin band of Wampanoags, openly welcomed the Pilgrims, taught them how to farm thus, providing them with food and saving them from starvation. The first Native American to encounter the Pilgrims was Samoset, who was a sagamore or chief of a distant band of Algonquins - the Morattiggon, he was on an extended fishing trip visiting the Wampanoags, when he boldly walked into the Pilgrims camp saluting them in English, bidding them welcome. The Englishman noted, that on Friday February 16, 1621, that Samoset by himself entered boldly into their camp saying "hello Englishman," and bidding them welcome. They also noted "he was a man of free speech, as far as he could express his mind." Samoset spent that first night with the Pilgrims describing to them the whole Country side, and of every Province, and of every sagamore, and their number of men, and strengths. Samoset stayed the night, leaving the Pilgrims the next morning.

Samoset returned, March 22, 1621, with Squanto, who is most popularized by American schools. He was the only surviving

native of the Patuxet, known to the Pilgrims as New Plimmoth. Squanto had just returned from London (he was one of the first twenty captives sold by Hunt, a Master of a ship, who then sold them to Master Slanie who took them to Cornehill, England) and found, upon his return, that his people who had inhabited Patuxet had succumbed to an extraordinary plague. (this is the same village the Pilgrims are calling New Plimmoth) It was Squanto who taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn, and to fertilize earthen mounds with fish i.e., herrings or shads. The following fall, after hunting fowl, the Pilgrims harvested 20 acres of corn, six acres of barley and peas all according to the manner of the Algonquin agriculturist, they invited the Sachem Woosamaquin otherwise known as Chief Massasoit, (the Wampanoags chief who first welcomed the Pilgrims to share the land) to celebrate their harvest. Accepting, Chief Massasoit brought five deer, and ninety of his men with him to the feast. So now we can sort of figure what was feasted on at the "First Thanksgiving:" a bird, corn, peas, roasted venison, and beer.

This feast lasted five days and was celebrated as a treaty, which was supposed to benefit both Algonquins and Pilgrims. Whether Massasoit would have welcomed, let alone enter into an agreement with these Pilgrims had he known that the past August when the Mayflower crew were lost, hungry, and cold, they had blasphemously raided Indian graves in search for corn - to eat, and the personal artifacts of the dead - to reduce their enormous debt, no one will ever know. But within a generation of that treaty, the children of the Pilgrims who were at the first Thanksgiving, children not even born at the time of the feast, beheaded King Philip, son of Chief Massasoit. They placed his head on a pole and left it in the fort for 25 years, as in a celebration. These children of the "First Thanksgiving," then sold the Wampanoag's and other Algonquin bands of people, without whom their parents would have almost certainly starved to death, into slavery in the Mediterranean and the West Indies.

The events over the years leading up to this betrayal paint a clearer picture of how this turn of events could have happened.

Chief Massasoit had fathered two girls and three boys, and before his death he asked the General Court in Plymouth to give English names to his two sons. The Pilgrims subsequently named the former "Alexander" and the latter "Philip." After Alexander died, probably of poisoning, Philip became chief, and became known as "King Philip." According to Josephy, (The Patriot Chiefs, 1976) King Philip was as racially proud as an Indian ever was. He saw clearly what the colonists were doing to his people, and from the beginning recognized them as enemies who would have to be stopped. Despite the friendship between Massasoit and the colonial authorities, and although, he was outnumbered two to one, King Philip went to war. The interracial friction that resulted in this conflict had actually begun to spread years before his father's death. This was mostly because of trespassing issues, in which the natives had no such laws or understanding of such laws. Anger, mixed with anxiety, led to an explosive situation. Anxiety with the continuing and regularly increasing numbers of Englishmen who were arriving more and more often and who were providing material attractions that lured natives to them. Anger that Christianity was undermining the authority of the chiefs, and dividing the people.

Time and again the Indians' patriotic attempts to maintain life and freedom were undermined and defeated by ancient animosities between the various tribes who were forced to deal with new European influence. The whites readily recognized the hostilities that existed among the various tribes they met, and from the beginning were quick to use these native rivalries, jealousies, enmities, and ambitions to their own advantage. They followed the "divide and conquer" policy and played ancient foes against one another for the benefit of themselves. This attitude, stemmed in part from the Aristotelian theory that some persons were by nature meant to be masters and others slaves, it combined with the divide and conquer tactics that worked so well for Columbus in the Caribbean and in Mexico for Cortes. Both of these pitting native against native.

It is no wonder these divide and conquer tactics worked so well, with King Philip's War, in the treachery committed by the traitor Alderman. To the God-fearing Puritans of New England, Philip was a satanic agent, "a hellhound, fiend, serpent, catiff, and dog." Somehow, in their panic and wrath, they conceived of him as a rebel, leading a conspiracy and an uprising against established authority. It was as if invading Indians had landed on the coast of England and had then considered rebels and Englishmen who might have risen to throw them out. On August 12, 1676; the English, guided by Alderman who surrounded King Philip, and Annawon, Philip's war chief, while they slept. In the morning Philip was shot by Alderman, a traitor against his people.

We also learn from reading Josephy that when it was discovered that it was indeed Philip who was assassinated, the English broke into a cheer and exultantly decapitated and quartered the sachem's body and carried his head back to Plymouth, where in celebration, it was stuck on a pole and remained on public display for twenty-five years. These are the actions of the people who considered themselves to be "civilized," and the Native American to be "Savages."

In the end, my question: (what comes to your mind, when I ask about Thanksgiving?) turns out not to be so simple especially when one takes a closer look at the true history of this holiday which we are celebrating this week. What we should consider is that the Thanksgiving Celebration can actually be divided into three distinct celebrations; (1) traditional celebrations of thanksgiving to the Creator by the indigenous population, (2) the thanksgiving celebrated between Massasoit, the Algonquin Chief of the Wampanoags, and the thankful pilgrims for the knowledge received by the natives; and, (3) the beheading of King Philip and the selling into slavery the offspring of the natives of the first thanksgiving.

COLUMBUS INVADES AMERICA, 1492

In 1492, Columbus arrived in a hemisphere in which:

1. The Hohokam of the Southwest had developed extensive irrigation systems;
2. Anasazi architects built multi-level "apartment" complexes in the Chaco Canyon of the Southwest;
3. The Kiowa and other Plains nations had developed seven different and distinct varieties of corn;
4. Agricultural communities along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers used floodlands and dikes to enhance the harvest;
5. The Moundbuilders of Illinois constructed a pyramid 100 feet high with a 17 acre base;
6. The Iroquois Confederacy of the east coast had developed into one of the most complex political units of the time;
7. The Makah nation used large carved cedar canoes to hunt whales, harpooning them with 18 foot harpoons. Many other west coast cultures were canoe-makers, often making canoes to hold 40 people;
8. Over six hundred varieties of houses were used, depending on the environment and the lifestyle of the nation.

This was his first voyage. He returned to Spain with Native People who he had taken as slaves. He wrote in his log, "they are docile and ought to be good servants." On his second voyage he captured 1,500 Arawak people and filled his ship with 500 to be taken to Spain as slaves. Only 300 of the Arawaks survived the voyage and were sold as slaves in Seville.

In subsequent journeys, Columbus instituted a system in Cibao whereby each person over the age of 14 was required to bring a certain amount of gold dust to a collection spot. When they complied, they were given a token to wear around their neck. If the Spanish found any person without a token they would cut off their hands or kill them as an example to others. During the two years under this system, over 1/3 of the Native population of Hispaniola was killed. Conservative estimates count this to be between 125,000 and a half million people.

Information from: An American Indian Perspective on Columbus, An Indian Education Curriculum, by Esther Stutzman, produced by the Coos County Indian Education Coordination Program in Coos Bay, Oregon. Copies of the curriculum are available at the Olympia Food Co-op.