Survival, Adaptation, and Bargains: Native Political Strategies in Early Colonial New England*

Gleb V. Aleksandrov
International Center of Anthropology, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow

ABSTRACT

Many contemporary popular works and even some scholarly publications dealing with indigenous populations of the New World present native peoples as hapless victims of the European expansionism that were incapable of preventing or even dealing with the continuous encroachment of white settlers on their traditional homelands. While the effect of European colonization on native communities was often devastating, this perspective leaves out of consideration the ability of Native American societies to adapt to changing circumstances and to influence the re-shaping of the world around them. Indigenous leaders employed a number of adaptation strategies designed to foster the retention of tribal political organization, economic systems, and collective identity, at least to some extent. This paper explores the political strategies employed by native groups in New England in the seventeenth century, focusing on the native leaders who were the most successful in dealing with their European counterparts – Uncas, the Mohegan sachem and Robin Cassacinamon, the Pequot leader. We will explore the specific political tools used by these leaders, how those differed from traditional native political strategies and why they were ultimately successful. We will also explore the possible adaptive strategies used by individuals not in positions of leadership. As we will show, Native Americans were not passive victims of circumstances but rather, they were active participants in the colonial encounter. Native adaptation strategies were well thought out and successful. They also had a significant and sometimes a defining influence on the development of the colonies.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1620 the history of English settlement in New England began. For many native groups, especially those along the Atlantic coast, their whole world would change dramatically. At least this is the generally accepted popular narrative. This narrative presents the native people as passive victims of circumstances, of predatory European expansion, essentially as hapless 'savages' unable to influence or comprehend the dramatic history unfolding around them. This is, in essence, another permutation of the noble savage idea, in the spirit of the nineteenth century ethnography, though with a modern twist.

Establishment of permanent English settlements was indeed a new and unexpected development, especially for the native political leaders. However, the native people were not passive victims of all those events. They understood perfectly well that the world around them was changing and attempted, often successfully, to influence this process.

This article examines the strategies employed by the Native people in New England in the seventeenth century that allowed them to preserve independence to some extent, or certain aspects of traditional lifestyle, or both. One should note that those successful survival strategies focused on establishing a productive relationship with the colonists, not on outright resistance. New England of the seventeenth century does not provide many examples of direct resistance, much less armed resistance, to colonial expansion. The major exception is King Philip's War, in which an alliance led by the Wampanoag did attempt to curb the growth of the colonies by waging war against them. In general, though, open conflict was rare in New England during this period. Some form of cooperation with the colonies was the 'mainstream' of Native politics. Some Native leaders were markedly more successful than others. We will examine the most successful (and the best documented) among them and attempt to determine what made them successful, what common political strategies and approaches they employed and why. Examining successful Native political strategies used in dealing with overwhelming and aggressive colonial expansion and their influence on early New England society may shed further light on the importance of Native political agency and the ways it manifested in other colonial contexts.

SOURCES

Any study of Indian politics inevitably faces the issue of lack of Native sources. Native Americans have left no written record. The existing colonial sources are inherently biased, sometimes in the extreme. Even the authors who try to portray their Native neighbors in a somewhat balanced fashion are prone to incorrect assumptions and poor understanding of Native social and cultural norms. Still, some aspects of political life of Native New England, such as the structure of formal alliances between various groups, can be inferred with reasonable certainty. Others are at best conjectural. As Michael Oberg noted, such a study by necessity implies some 'leaps of faith' (Oberg 2003: vii), and the best we can do is to attempt to avoid those as much as possible.

Our main sources are the extensive narratives by colonial authors such as William Bradford, John Winthrop, and especially those who wrote specifically on native-colonial relations, such as John Mason, Leon Gardener, Daniel Gookin *etc*. While colonial authors were almost universally erroneous in their evaluation of the motives of the actions of Native Americans, they were generally accurate in their factual descriptions.

Several excellent studies of early New England politics exist. The works of James Axtell, Francis Jennings and Colin Calloway (Calloway 2013a, 2013b; Axtell 1986; Jennings 1975, 1984, 1990) can be by and large considered contemporary classics. We owe great deal to James Drake, whose 'King Philip's War: Civil War in New England' (Drake 2000) is a great example of highlighting the influence of Native politics and policies on the colonial society. In the last two decades several important works appeared focusing specifically on native political agency. This study owes a great debt to Michael Leroy Oberg, author of 'Uncas, first of the Mohegans' (Oberg 2003), to Julie Fisher and David Silverman, authors of 'Ningret, Sachem of the Niantics and Narragansetts' (Fisher and Silverman 2014) and to Shawn Wiemann, the author of 'Lasting Marks: The Legacy of Robin Cassacinamon and the Survival of the Mashantucket Pequot Nation' (Wiemann 2011).

BACKGROUND NOTES

After 1620, the many Native groups inhabiting New England had to deal with a presence of a growing number of English settlements. This was both a source of potential danger, and an opportunity. The arrival

of potential allies was generally welcomed because allies were desperately needed. Just a year before the Plymouth settlers arrived, an epidemic ravaged New England, killing the majority of the population (Cook 1973; Hoornbeek 1977). The political landscape of New England changed dramatically even before the arrival of the colonists – groups that were the most powerful just a few years ago were decimated. Those who fared relatively better, particularly the Narragansett, suddenly found themselves in a very advantageous position.

New England Algonquian groups were led by sachems whose power was largely based on personal authority and respect, and almost never implied any ability to directly command their subjects. Sachems were always looking for opportunities to cement their authority by achieving military success, by arranging profitable marriages or making new allies. This need was especially pronounced for sachems whose people were in a dangerous position and whose authority was consequently questioned. The rapid shifts in political landscape also created opportunities for ambitious leaders of smaller groups. Such leaders were obviously looking for potential allies but finding them among the neighboring groups was not always easy, it required a considerable investment. Any diplomatic meeting was to be accompanied by the exchange of gifts, and the chances of securing a neighboring sachem's friendship was related to the value of the gifts exchanged. Both the ambitious up-and-comers and the leaders of groups hit by the pandemic had limited resources, hampering their diplomatic abilities.

The Englishmen were at first a relatively small group, but with access to valuable trade goods, such as firearms and manufactured fabrics. Initially, the English were seen primarily as an advantageous potential ally. The colonists themselves were equally desperately looking for allies. The persistent fear of Indian attacks was a huge part of the colonial mindset (Bradford 1981: 70–71; Johnson 1910: 52, 115; see in detail in Cave 1996: 13–23), and Indian trade was a significant source of income. So, both sides were looking for alliances.

Colonial sources tell us that the English soon after arrival at Plymouth sent envoys to Massasoit, leader of a nearby tribe, and signed an agreement with him (Bradford 1981: 88). However, this assumes that Massasoit had no say in the matter. On closer examination the situation seems different. Ousamequin (whom the English called Massasoit) clearly showed interest in Plymouth from the very beginning. Even if we assume that his subject, Tisquantum (known

popularly as Squanto), one of the first Native Americans encountered by the colonists, came to meet the Plymouth leaders without consulting his sachem first, the decision to assist the colonists in planting and growing corn was undoubtedly made by Ousamequin. Furthermore, just a couple of days before landing the colonists made a short foray to the shore and ransacked some buried corn – which Bradford claimed was done by accident, they believed it abandoned (Bradford 1981: 74–77). No mention of the episode was later made in the treaty. Which means that Ousamequin probably went into some trouble or at least exerted his authority to settle the matter. Even in this brief episode we can see that the native leader actively fostered the alliance with the colonies. The reasons are obvious – the Wampanoag led by Ousamequin were hit hard by the epidemic and were located close to several groups that suffered far less and were expanding their influence.

Ousamequin remained an ally of the English until his death. Colonial authors attribute that mostly to the fact that the English helped him when he was sick, and that undoubtedly played a part (Winslow 1624: 25–29). Economically the Wampanoag benefited from trade and easy access to manufactured goods, and Ousamequin himself successfully secured his territories from potential encroachment by Native competitors using the threat of calling on his new allies. The fact that his authority was tied to an alliance was not an issue – diplomacy was always a major source of any sachem's power. Gradually the terms of Wampanoag-English alliance changed. Later the English would claim more and more power over the Wampanoag, leading to eventual collapse of the alliance and to King Philip's War led by Ousamequin's son Metakom.

We see here an example of a native leader quickly – literally within days – identifying and seizing an opportunity provided by the arrival of the Englishmen to benefit both himself and his people. Ousamequin was the first to adopt this strategy, trading a part of his political independence for significant political and military advantages. But he still relied largely on traditional Native political tools, and the position of the Wampanoag gradually worsened. Another, arguably more successful example of exploiting the potential of alliance with the English, was Uncas.

INDIVIDUAL LEADERS: UNCAS

Uncas is something of a controversial figure in American history. For a long time, he was an archetypal 'good' Indian, a friendly savage who recognized the inherent superiority of the English and supported them to the best of his limited ability (*e.g.*, Stone 1842). In later decades he was re-evaluated, portrayed as basically a traitor, a selfish opportunist who betrayed the Indian cause for his own personal gain and fostered the destruction of his own people (Sylvester 1910: 246–247; Weeks 1919: 229, 233). This later view was present not just in popular accounts, but in relatively recent research as well (Jennings 1975: 179, 227; Knapp 1985). However, as Michael Oberg points out, those two approaches tell essentially the same story, the traditional story of colonial subjugation. In this story it does not really matter if Uncas is portrayed positively or negatively – he is still presented as a purely reactive figure, merely responding to the actions of the colonists (Oberg 2003: 12).

The Mohegan, the group to which Uncas belonged, were closely tied to the Pequots who dominated the Connecticut river valley from the 1620s onwards. Uncas came from a long line of sachems and clearly had some influence among the Pequot, to the point where he felt appropriate to make a bid to be elected as their chief sachem. He was unsuccessful.

Uncas was, at this point, as Oberg notes, a failed sachem (Oberg 2003: 50). Traditional instruments of native politics failed him – he could not find enough allies to support his bid for power among the Pequots, he did not receive enough tribute to bribe potential allies, and his raids brought him little success.

After the situation in the region settled following the establishment of the colonies, Uncas started making diplomatic forays to the English. Uncas helped establish an alliance with the Narragansett which eventually drew the colonies into an ongoing Pequot-Narragansett conflict, resulting in the defeat and virtual annihilation of the Pequots (see Cave 1996: Ch. IV). Even before the war Uncas would make several attempts to oust Sassacus the chief Pequot sachem, when run into hiding among the Narragansett when he failed, only to obtain a pardon and try again (Johnson 1993: 54–55; Salisbury 1984: 215).

English narrative sources claim that Uncas joined the colonists as an ally during the Pequot war, but it would probably be more accurate to say that the English joined him. The formal reason for war was the

murder of one captain Stone, but the conflict was brewing for some time already, and colonists had received a wealth of information about Pequot preparations for war. Colonial authors tended to claim Pequots were extremely warlike, and consequently them attacking the colonies was just a matter of time. This reputation was established by the biggest source the English had on the Pequots – that is, Uncas. For month he had made accusations against the Pequots, while simultaneously stressing his own good intentions and overall friendliness towards the English (Winthrop 1968: 270). Instead of relying on tributary relations and military alliances, Uncas not only fostered a relationship with the colonies, he used information and misinformation as his primary political tools, manipulating the colonists to secure for himself a position of power unattainable by traditional means.

With the Pequots defeated, Uncas secured a portion of their land for his people, a significant number of prisoners which were quickly adopted and bolstered the Mohegan numbers, and the goodwill of the colonial authorities (Oberg 2003: 72; Cave 1996: 161). Of special note was his continuing support of the English after the so-called Mystic massacre, a cruel mass killing of Pequot civilians by the colonists. This episode caused most of the Native allies to abandon the English – all of them, in fact, except Uncas (Mason 1736: 31).

The Pequot War was a triumph for Uncas – his chief rival was dead, his own position was as strong as ever, his potential rivals the Narragansett were weakened by the war. Thanks to the Pequot prisoners bolstering Mohegan ranks, he was now in charge of a fairly large and prosperous group and was by no means a 'failed sachem' anymore. He was also the primary ally of the English next to Ousamequin.

The next important episode in his career came shortly after the war, and involved another one of Uncas's rivals, the Narragansett sachem Miantonomi – who was accused by Uncas of organizing a conspiracy against the English, eventually leading to conflict in which the colonies indirectly supported the Mohegan. Miantonomi was put on trial and surrendered to Uncas, who promptly beheaded his rival, further proving himself to the English and simultaneously crippling the Narragansett (DeForest 1851: 198; Sylvester 1910: 412–413). Again, the colonies relied on the information provided by Uncas about Miantonomi conspiring against them. Even though the Narragansett sachem presented evidence to the contrary, Uncas already established himself as a reliable ally and a source of information. Miantonomi, on the other

hand, was far less agreeable and did not seek an alliance with the colonies nearly as actively. He led a much more powerful group than Uncas, and his authority was not predicated on such an alliance. Over the decades Uncas used this tactic of accusing his rival of being the threat to the English several times, both getting rid of a rival and gaining the gratitude of the colonies for eliminating a threat. Decades later, during King Philip's war he was still, despite very advanced age, a staunch ally of the colonies.

Aside from those inter-group affairs, in which Uncas essentially used the English to eliminate his rivals and strengthen his authority, he was also quite vocal in his support for the English in non-military matters. He was, more importantly, the first sachem to officially swear allegiance to the colonial authorities. Another such case was the Narragansett, but they declared themselves subjects of the King of England, and not the colonial governors, putting their chief sachem on an equal footing with a governor, both subjects unto the same king (Pulsipher 2003). Uncas directly acknowledged the leadership of the United Colonies of New England and gave up his right to conduct independent foreign policy (Oberg 2003: 79; Winthrop 1908: 258). He can therefore be seen as a prime example of colonial authorities robbing traditional leaders of their power.

Except that he was really not. Uncas's proclamation of subject status can be viewed as an exchange. He did surrender his right to declare wars independently. Though, on closer inspection, it seems that he did not need that right all that much, he preferred the English to eliminate his opponents for him. If necessary, Uncas could always make the English declare the war instead of him by claiming that such-and-such is threatening English allies who they swore to protect. In exchange for that partial surrender of sovereignty, aside from the gifts he received from the governors regularly, the core Mohegan territory was out of limits for expanding English settlements. Even when Mohegan lands were taken over, it was the recently acquired former Pequot territories, and the Mohegans retained their right to hunt and forage on these territories (Oberg 2003: 153, 155, 157–158).

Despite his subject status Uncas continued to conduct his own policies, not always in agreement with the English authorities. Even during the Pequot war there were occasions upon which Uncas acted contrary to the English, for example executing a prisoner the English commanders explicitly insisted should be kept alive (Gardener 1833:

149). Later, Uncas and his men would undertake punitive expeditions against the Pequot remnants whose communities were under his authority – against the wishes of the English authorities (Oberg 2003: 118–119). Eventually he would grow bold enough to conduct foreign policy on his own, establishing alliance with his former rival, the Narragansett sachem Ninigret (Records… 1853: 158, 172). All those actions drew the ire of the English authorities, and there was considerable concern among them that Uncas is growing too bold and independent (Oberg 2003: 144). But the support of the Mohegan was too important in the face of potential opposition of other native groups, so Uncas was free to pursue his goals with minimal interference – though the aforementioned Pequot settlements were taken from his control due to the actions of another notable native politician, Robin Cassacinamon. Since their lands were secure, the Mohegan did not face the dissolution of traditional lifestyle due to socio-environmental impact of the colonies. As a result, the Mohegan could carry on traditional production practices and were not forced to labor for the colonists or to obtain loans from them. Uncas and his people were not even encouraged too much to convert to Christianity. The staunch supporter of the English died a pagan, as did most of his people. Initially supportive of the missionary efforts of the English, at least formally, Uncas had eventually withdrawn this support completely, and yet this did not hinder his political alliance with the United Colonies (Axtell 1986: 147; Gookin 1970: 82–83). By surrendering his right to declare wars and providing military support (in most cases against his rivals) Uncas secured political, economic, and spiritual independence of his people. This was in essence the same deal Ousamequin made before him – surrender political independence in exchange for economic independence, surrender the right to go to war to preserve your land, *etc*.

In retrospect it might seem obvious that as the colonies expanded the terms of this ‘deal’ would become less and less favorable. This is exactly what happened. Was Uncas's strategy in dealing with the English short-sighted? Was he really an unprincipled power-hungry manipulator who sacrificed his people's independence for personal comfort and benefit? In short, did he fail as a political leader?

This is very doubtful. The Mohegan retained their independence in most matters throughout Uncas's lifetime, and most his children's lifetime. The eventual growth of the colonies that seems inevitable to us was far from assured. Besides that, the colonies changed so drastically

throughout that time, that hardly anyone could predict it – the creation of the Dominion of New England and the loss of political independence, the appointment of royal governors, and eventually the Independence war could have hardly been foreseen by anyone in the early to mid-seventeenth century. In the context of his time, and in relations to the colonies as they were during his time, Uncas's strategy was staggeringly successful, ensuring the degree of independence and prosperity hardly seen anywhere else in the regions colonized by Europeans. From his earliest days, Uncas was very much an independent political actor, expertly judging the situation and manipulating it to his advantage and using his position as an information broker to great effect. The very first large-scale conflict in new England, the Pequot war (or at least the English involvement), was engineered by Uncas, as was the decline of the Narragansett who otherwise could have posed a major threat to the colonies – a perfect example of native agency and native influence on the very course of colonial history.

INDIVIDUAL LEADERS: ROBIN CASSACINAMON

Uncas's key achievements lay in the sphere of visible political and military action – treaties, alliances, raids *etc*. Another potential approach to essentially the same goal was through personal connections. This is exemplified by another notable native leader, Robin Cassacinamon, and his close friend and ally, John Winthrop Jr.

Robin Cassacinamon was a Pequot, a member of the group defeated soundly by the English-Mohegan-Narragansett alliance. According to the Treaty of Hartford of 1638 the Pequot no longer existed – the very use of the name Pequot was forbidden, as was the use of Pequot language. In reality, Pequots did survive. Some were imprisoned by the English and used as free labor or sold as slaves. But many Pequots were spread among the English allies as prisoners. They were adopted into the victorious groups to replenish the ranks and replace those lost in the war or were released after accepting tributary status. Many Pequots were either living among other groups or settled in separate communities as tributaries to victorious sachems like Uncas. This incorporation was relatively quick, proven by the fact that the Mohegan delegation sent to Boston in 1638 included several Pequots, among them a young man whom the English called Robin, or Pequot Robin. Their goal was to secure a bride for Uncas, a Pequot woman serving as a maid in the family residence of John Winthrop, governor

of Massachusetts. Robin stayed with the Winthrops for a while. This is probably when he first met and established a connection with the governor's son, John Winthrop Jr. (Williams 1973: 206; 1988: 168).

Winthrop was the son of the Massachusetts governor John Winthrop, one of the most prominent political and religious leaders of the Bay Colony at the time. His son became first the governor of the short-lived Saybrook colony and later Connecticut. While his father was primarily known as a lawyer and theologian, Winthrop Jr. was more of a diplomat and a scholar – less pious and less respected by the Puritan community than his father, but equally if not more successful as a governor and a politician (for a detailed exploration see Woodward 2010).

Soon Winthrop Jr. became the leader of a new settlement, initially called Nameag, later New London, in the Connecticut valley. It was established close to a small Pequot community, subordinate to Uncas – one to which Cassacinamon had organized his followers and drawn Pequots from other Mohegan territories. Pequot presence was one of the major arguments when choosing the location for the settlement – Winthrop argued that Pequot neighbors would provide a valuable source of labor and protection (Winthrop 1908: 520). And they did. In fact, the cross-cultural integration was so developed in Nameag that when a few years later Uncas tried to use force against Pequots, their English neighbors actively defended them against the Mohegans, and participated in all kinds of sabotage against Mohegan authority well before that (Winthrop 1968: 281–282, 311; Woodward 2010: 130; Records 1859: 130). That is pretty much unprecedented in colonial history. For the Pequots Nameag was a major victory – for the first time since the war they were living as Pequots, in their own community, in their ancestral territory, led by a Pequot leader.

The alliance between Cassacinamon and Winthrop is different from other similar arrangements in many respects. Firstly, the alliance proved to be extremely long-lasting, existing all the way until Cassacinamon's death in the early 1680s. Secondly, it apparently went beyond political expediency and was founded on genuine friendship, as far as we could tell, since both men would support each other even when it would provide them no benefit of any kind. Most importantly, it was an alliance of weak parties. Uncas was a head of a small band who had large aspirations and thus allied himself to a more powerful faction. Cassacinamon and Winthrop were both in weak positions. One was an informal leader (he would not be formally recognized as a sachem until

much later) of a small band of Pequot remnants, with no land of his own, few allies and meager means. The other was a head of a tiny settlement established in a strategically important and therefore hotly contested area and he had some support in the colonies due to family connections, but also had powerful enemies and competitors. Both were still comparatively young.

Both lacked the traditional sources of political power. Both recognized that the situation they found themselves in was different from how those societies traditionally functioned and saw opportunities to secure their position through unconventional means. Specifically, both became intercultural mediators. Initially Cassacinamon was not even perceived as a political leader by the colonists and was seen as just an interpreter, often referred to as Winthrop's servant. He used the access to information on both sides to manipulate them – for example providing the English with information on Uncas's increasingly independent and aggressive actions (Wiemann 2011: 22). Winthrop similarly soon established himself as an authority on the Pequots and the Indians in general, since he seemingly managed to secure a remarkably peaceful relations with his native neighbors – he was consulted by much older, more experienced, and more powerful colonists on such matters (Wiemann 2011: 171). Winthrop and Cassacinamon inserted themselves into all sorts of native-colonial political scenarios, first as interpreters and mediators, but as time went on their diplomatic skills earned them the respect and reputation well beyond their 'actual' means. By the mid-1640s they petitioned the Commissioners of the United Colonies to free the Nameag Pequots from their status as Uncas's tributaries. The petition was unsuccessful, but 'Young man Robin, Mr. Winthrop's servant' was by that time recognized by the Commissioners as a leader and representative of a distinct group of Indians, rubbed shoulders with governors and most powerful sachems of New England, his words heard and considered the same as Uncas's – who ruled over a group perhaps an order of magnitude larger than Nameag Pequots (Winthrop 1968: 131; Wiemann 2011: 149–150).

His growing importance was recognized by both allies and enemies. They understood that the informal, personal alliance with Winthrop made both stronger. Ninigret, the Narragansett sachem, specifically tried to dissolve that alliance by trying to convince Winthrop that he treats the Pequots with too much respect, as equals, rather than as 'little dogs' as befits such a small and weak group (Williams 1988:

252). The English rivals acted similarly – John Mason, Uncas's chief ally among the English pointedly refused to call Cassacinamon anything but 'servant' or 'young servant', even by the time his authority was explicitly recognized by the colonies (Winthrop 1968: 253). Winthrop ignored such pleas.

Eventually both would achieve their political goals. Winthrop Jr. became the governor of Connecticut and one of the Commissioners of United Colonies. Cassacinamon would achieve what seemed impossible after the Pequot war – the recognition of Pequots not only existing, despite the 'eradication', but also their independence from any other native authority, and subordination only to the Commissioners (Records 1859: 134, 142; McBride 1996: 82).

His own status was recognized in several ways. For starters, unlike other sachems who were called sachems, Cassacinamon was referred to occasionally as 'governour of the Pequots' (Winthrop 1968: 4–5). He received ample gifts from the colonists for his assistance in resolving disputes with Indians (some treaties signed between colonies and tribes in the second half of the century bear his mark as one of the witnesses). He was free to meet and talk to governors, commissioners, and magistrates all over New England, occasionally travelling hundreds of kilometers to mediate particularly tough negotiations (Wiemann 2011: 240). Most importantly, when colonists tried to encroach on the Pequot lands, Cassacinamon would defend native land rights in court – and was successful more often than not (*Ibid.*: 225, 233).

The agreement between Pequots and the English stipulated that the latter have the right to remove the native 'governour' and replace him (Wiemann 2011: 214; Records 1859: 225–228, 284–286, 319). Cassacinamon with his stubborn refusal to cede lands to the colonists for a pittance would seemingly give them many reasons to do just that. However, he remained in power, likely because his assistance as a diplomat and mediator was far more valuable than the territories his people controlled.

Uncas never seemed to seriously target Cassacinamon, despite many reasons to do so. Miantonomi, the Narragansett sachem who accused Uncas of plotting against the English (which Cassacinamon also did) and tried to take some of his lands (which Cassacinamon managed to do by securing Pequot independence) was eventually killed by Uncas. Cassacinamon was not even threatened personally – despite two violent raids against Nameag organized by Uncas. It seems even to his

sovereign-turned-rival, Cassacinamon's diplomatic skills were more important than his lands.

Another detail that points to his high status is the gift of a horse he received (Wiemann 2011: 217). Not only was the gift valuable in monetary terms, and a fine horse was by no means cheap, its symbolic value was even more significant. New England natives did not have horses, and the colonists, recognizing the military and symbolic benefits of this situation, prohibited the sale of horses to the Natives, or even giving them as a gift. The fact that Cassacinamon not only managed to obtain a horse but was given it as a gift by the Commissioners speaks volumes – it was a unique recognition of his status as a legitimate leader and a reliable ally. Along with the title of 'governour', the weight his word carried in colonial courts, friendship with Winthrop and at least familiarity with most colonial magistrates Cassacinamon came perhaps closer than any Native American to becoming a legitimate high-ranking colonial official. He ensured the survival of Pequots as a separate group, by restoring their rights to the core Pequot lands and self-governance. Both were eroded by colonial expansion later, but the foundation created by Cassacinamon was solid enough for the Pequots survive until present day.

The strategy he used was something entirely alien to both Native and English political experience. Traditional alliances were founded on mutual benefit and often on direct military support. Cassacinamon's Pequots, despite their long-standing reputation as fierce warriors, were few in number and limited in resources, their strictly military value was not that great. Economically, while their labor was crucial at the early years of settlement of Nameag, they lacked the capability to produce valuable trade goods in quantities sufficient for serious trade. In traditional Native terms they had nothing to offer – Ninigret was completely right, from the traditional point of view, when he called them 'little dogs'. Cassacinamon ensured the survival of his people and his own political power almost exclusively through personal connections and intercultural diplomacy.

Despite the differences in their strategies and positions, and despite their lifelong rivalry, there are a number of common traits between Uncas and Cassacinamon which in our opinion explain why they were successful where other native leaders would sometimes completely fail. The chief reason is obvious – both relied on relatively unconventional strategies. Johnson defines a number of 'classic' na-

tive political strategies (Johnson 1993: vi), of which only one (making alliances) fits what Uncas and Cassacinamon were doing. But even in that point they were quite different from most their contemporaries. Uncas did not hesitate to assume a tributary status to the English, which most others tried to avoid, and by doing so actually managed to secure a number of tangible benefits while sacrificing very little. Cassacinamon employed even more unconventional means, mostly forgoing the traditional ways of paying tribute to more powerful, in this case English, sachems, or providing military aid (though Pequots did join the English during King Philip's War, and Cassacinamon did personally shoot Narragansett sachem Canonchet (De Forest 1851: 283; Saltonstall 1966: 9), but by this time he had more than established his position already).

Both sachems adopted these unconventional strategies out of necessity. In traditional native terms both started out in positions that were barely survivable – leading small groups with few warriors, with no power base and no allies to speak of. In other words, they were forced to adapt to changing circumstances. Stronger groups like the Wampanoag and the Narragansett were powerful enough to continue relying on traditional native politics – which eventually failed, forcing a confrontation with the growing colonies. Those who were willing to bargain, to sacrifice some aspects of independence to preserve other, were more successful in the long run.

Another common trait shared by Uncas and Cassacinamon – they and, by extension, their people never converted to Christianity. But others did.

COLLECTIVE STRATEGIES: PRAYING TOWNS

So far, we examined the strategies employed by individual Native leaders. But agency is not limited to political leadership. Individuals of all kinds of political status employed various means to secure a more stable position in the newly established colonial society. Political leaders could negotiate their position in some way by exploiting the need of the colonists, for example, their constant demand for political and military allies. Most native inhabitants of New England did not have this luxury.

However, many Native Americans saw another opportunity to integrate themselves into the colonial society and ensure a degree of independence – thus exercising their political agency, despite not be-

ing independent political subjects. This opportunity was created by the colonists themselves, specifically by the missionaries.

Unlike the French and Spanish colonies, where the Catholic Church organized massive missionary campaigns, in the English colonies the missionary activity was largely a private enterprise. The Church of England had far less resources to spare, and in Puritan New England its influence was very limited at best. Most Puritan preachers also had little interest in converting their Native neighbors. Converting the Indians was never their objective – the goal was to establish a godly society (thus 'spreading the Good Word'). Thus, the primary objects of proselytizing were the colonists, the foundation of that godly society to be 'purified' from the vices of the Old World. If any natives would somehow convert and become true Christians that would, of course, be welcomed, but that was not the goal of the Puritan missionary enterprise. In the seventeenth century the circle of actual missionaries was limited to John Eliot and a few of his colleagues and compatriots. Eliot was undoubtedly a talented missionary, a great speaker, capable of instilling real fervor in the audience. He was the first English preacher to preach in native language, and he translated the Bible into Algonquian (Cogley 1999).

But for all Eliot's talents, he had very little support, with colonial authorities limiting themselves to vague words of encouragement. Most of Eliot's funding was provided by benefactors in England. Many colonists treated the Native converts with clear and obvious suspicion if not outright hostility. At the same time, Eliot's project was remarkably ambitious. He planned to establish 'praying towns', settlements in which the Native converts would not just be instructed in Christian doctrine, but would also adopt a godly lifestyle, modelled after the Old Testament as interpreted by Eliot himself (Eliot 1972). This would require a far more drastic transformation than simple conversion, which did not necessarily require abandoning traditional lifestyle. The scope of the transformation required from the converts was akin to what was happening in Jesuit reductions in South America, but the Jesuit campaign was supported by the administrative machinery of the Catholic Church and the compliance of the Indians was ensured by force.

Eliot did not have the same level of resources at his disposal. Additionally, unlike the Jesuits in South America, Eliot had no intention of using force to ensure conversion – partly because he had no way to

do so in any case, partly because the core idea of many Puritan divines was a personal spiritual experience as the foundation of true conversion, which was impossible under duress.

Despite all that, Eliot's project was remarkably successful – on the eve of King Philip's War many Native Americans living within the territory of the colonies as such (*i.e.* on the lands belonging to the colonies) were 'praying' and lived in Eliot's settlements (Gookin 1970: 180–200). For all Eliot's talent, this kind of success can hardly be attributed solely to his prowess as a missionary, given how much converts had to give up. For example, traditionally agriculture, aside from clearing new plots of land, was considered a woman's job in native societies, but in praying towns men had to work the fields, while women had to stay at home. Undoubtedly this requirement of doing a woman's job was hard to swallow for many Indian men – not to mention relinquishing traditional jewelry and hairstyles which had social significance. In short, Eliot's project was successful against all odds.

The only conceivable reason for its success was the Indians themselves. The masses of converts flocking to praying towns were not suddenly overcame with Christian zeal. Members of the groups that retained their political or cultural autonomy, such as the Mohegan or even the Wampanoag were rare among the converts. It stands to reason that the primary motivation for those relocating to praying towns was not spiritual, but social. The converts expected, quite logically, that adopting the English ways and English religion would secure them a place in the colonial society. After all, the missionaries promised that by converting the Indians would join a universal Christian brotherhood. It was the most radical survival strategy – fully integrating into the colonial society, but the general principle of a 'bargain' remains the same. By giving up both cultural and political independence, the native converts hoped to preserve economic agency, personal freedom, and an independent identity. This last aspect was possible because Eliot, unlike many missionaries in other regions, worked diligently to preserve the Native language. The administration in praying towns was conducted in native languages, as was the preaching in most cases, and Native elders, teachers and even pastors were appointed as soon as possible. Eliot certainly intended to transform the Native way of life, but he thought that the Indians should remain Indians, should retain their own identity and not be assimilated (Aleksandrov 2022). Joining the praying communities would seemingly allow

their members to achieve that equal status of brothers in Christ, while simultaneously retaining a degree of separation in terms of identity. Given the alternatives, such as debt servitude, forced labor, or relocation, it seems the sacrifice was deemed acceptable. Importantly, it was the decision made by the Indians themselves, Eliot and his fellows were concerned with completely different matters. Their attempts at persuasion were limited to extorting the virtues of the Christian doctrine, much like in other missionary communities.

The ultimate result of this strategy of extreme adaptation was disastrous. During King Philip's War praying Indians were confined to their settlements and then forcibly relocated to a tiny island in Boston harbor, where many died of starvation and exposure (Gookin 1970: 459, 485–486; Drake 1841: 116). The other side of the conflict, the Wampanoag and their allies were also not exactly welcoming to those who were willing to forsake the Native way of life.

Despite that ultimately tragic failure, before the outbreak of the conflict the strategy was successful. The converts did indeed preserve their identity, which in some cases persists to this day, and had limited administrative autonomy. However, unlike independent political agents, the sachems, the praying Indians had no way to influence the colonies, and consequently were unable to adapt to a sudden change in circumstances. The price of the bargain in this case proved to be too steep. Still we think that the praying towns deserve exploration as a clear illustration of Native political and social agency which, in this case, determined the success of the early missionary project in New England while simultaneously showing the potential limitations of survival strategies used by Native people attempting to integrate themselves into the colonial society.

CONCLUSION

While the English colonies certainly dominated the region of New England both politically and economically throughout most of the seventeenth century, the local native population was far from passive victims of changing circumstances. Most native leaders saw the potential benefits in making alliances with the colonists, though some, like the Narragansett, were more hesitant. However, not every such alliance was equally successful. Notably, the most successful in dealing with the colonies were the leaders such as Uncas and Robin Cassacinamon who could not rely on traditional instruments of obtaining

and maintaining political leadership. Incapable of forming alliances in a traditional manner, they had to both rely on the support of the English and employ unfamiliar political strategies to secure that support. A particularly effective one was the use of misinformation, or rather information brokering. The colonists had little knowledge of their native neighbors, and desperately needed reliable sources of information and means of intercultural diplomacy. By providing this information and mediation, those native leaders became indispensable to the English and ensured continuing support, and by controlling the information they managed to successfully manipulate the colonial authorities into supporting them against native adversaries. As a result, those who started out in positions of little authority in traditional society managed to establish themselves as perhaps the most powerful native leaders in the region.

Their alliances with the colonists involved a political bargain – by partially surrendering their sovereignty in some areas, those leaders and their groups managed to preserve other aspects of their independence – such as the Mohegan. Nominally submitting to the English, they retained their economic and production practices, territory and religious autonomy. The exact conditions of such a bargain depended on particular leader's ability to manipulate the needs of the colonists – for example, the Mohegan under Uncas were capable of acting largely independently even in political matters and inter-group relations. Most importantly, the situation was not engineered by the colonies or colonial policies (in fact the application of the term colonial policy to early New England in general is questionable), it was a result of native political leaders adapting to changing situation in the region – first to the devastating epidemics, then to the arrival of the colonists. The alliances were initiated by the native leaders, not by the colonists. And their influence shaped the political history of the region in many ways – for example. The Pequot war it seems was largely the product of Uncas's ambition which made him draw the English into an already ongoing inter-group conflict. The political landscape of New England, it is system of alliances and complex network of political affiliation was shaped to a great extent by the actions of native leaders, not by the policies of colonial leadership. And the strategy was ultimately successful in many ways – groups whose leaders employed those strategies managed to preserve their territories and traditional way of life throughout the seventeenth century and later, and the communal iden-

tity persists to this day. Eventual loss of power of the successors of the seventeenth century leaders does not signify any fault at the strategy itself, but a further change of circumstances that could not have been predicted this far in advance.

On individual level, those who possessed no means of securing a profitable alliance with the colonists, also attempted to use a similar strategy of bargaining, surrendering political, economic, and even cultural autonomy to preserve a separate identity and find a stable ground in the shifting social landscape of the region. While this attempt was ultimately doomed to failure, it nevertheless explains unprecedented and otherwise puzzling success of the praying towns missionary project, which in turn influenced cultural politics of the United States in centuries to come. Again, the success of the praying towns was not due to the missionary efforts as such, but due to a conscious decision made by individual Native Americans to attempt to integrate themselves into the expanding colonial society.

These examples clearly show that despite what some later colonial and American authors and scholars claimed, Native Americans exerted a considerable, and, more importantly, conscious influence on the region's history. While traditional native political system could not handle the challenge of colonial expansion, it gave rise to new political strategies that proved to be quite successful. Furthermore, besides the importance of native agency in New England politics, this example can perhaps demonstrate how political agency of subaltern groups can manifest itself and influence the social and political reality even in the conditions of drastic power differences between cultures coexisting in the colonial context.

NOTE

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