

# The Shamanistic “Text” in Southern New England

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Anthropologist Jack Goody’s controversial distinction between literate and non-literate “logics” (Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1986) has come under increasing criticism from ethnographers who note great variety in the ways in which literacy is used and understood in various cultural settings (e.g. Besnier 1991). The emphasis in this debate has been on writing systems, and the impact of literacy on such important domains as ideas of personhood, historicity, and the ability to think abstractly. Less emphasis is generally placed on *reading* as an activity or a problematic. The concept of “visual literacy,” generally employed by art historians, examines the ways in which people familiarize themselves with signs of all kinds, and the sociocultural implications of this familiarity (e.g. Gundaker 1992). In historical archaeology, the relationship between the written and the wrought is usually framed in terms of the content of texts. This paper contrasts, in addition, the *forms* of texts; late prehistoric pictographic images and seventeenth-century vernacular language documents, created by the native people of southern New England, in light of their potential for illuminating archaeological and cultural historical data concerning the same peoples in the contact and later historic period.

Most petroglyph sites in southern New England are rocks jutting out into the water. A second type of pictographic image was often etched on amulets, or portable stones which were often pierced and possibly worn as pendants. Images include “haloed” heads, snakes, figures with outstretched hands or carrying objects such as bags or rattles, thunderbirds, various animal representations including turtles and deer, and other, abstract designs (Delabarre 1973:62–65, 92–103, 113). E.B. Delabarre documents such motifs on several rock outcroppings throughout central and southern New England (Figure 1: Delabarre 1928:figures 6, 16, 35, 100).

Similar motifs have been recorded at the Solon, Maine petroglyphs (Snow 1976), as well as a number with sexual connotations, including ithyphallic males, sexually receptive females and abstract male and female genitalia. Similar representations depicted on the Dighton rock, and Mark Rock in Warwick, Rhode Island (Figures 2 and 3).

At the Solon petroglyph, one of the phalli has wings, and 15 other birds are depicted as well, some with human forms (Snow 1976:287). A number of other petroglyphs and amulets have been reported from sites in Maine, southern New England, and Long Island, which depict this “triangular torso anthropomorph with birdlike attributes” and are said to be “Thunderbirds” or shamans with special connections to Thunderbirds in Algonquian ideology (Hedden 1991:42).

In Maine, triangular bodied anthropomorphs with bird attributes appear ca. 1000 A.D. and become frequent through time (Hedden 1991:43). In the earliest phase, they are depicted as “semi-naturalistic forms in association with late middle period sexual imagery. During the last

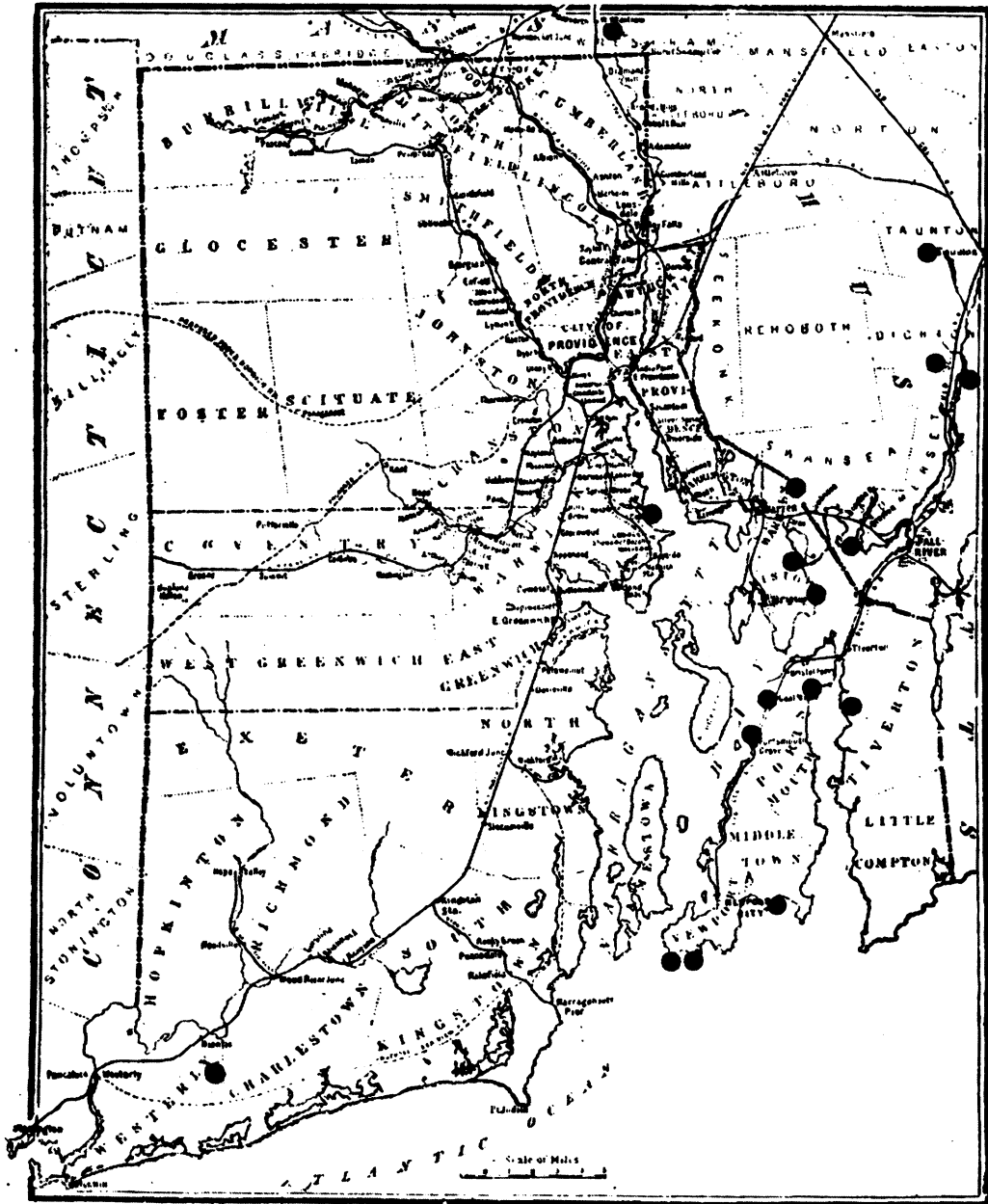


Figure 1: Map of petroglyph sites in southern New England (Delabarre 1928:figure 108, facing page 302).



Figure 2: Petroglyph from Solon, Maine. Drawing by Garrick Mallery (Delbarre 1928:figure 101).

period, the figures take on the sharply angular features" (Hedden 1991:44). Aside from petroglyph sites, these images appear in southern New England on amulets, pendants, shale disks, as part of ceramic designs. One well-known amulet recovered from a site near Amoskeag, New Hampshire is made of imported metals, and thus is evidence of the persistence of this motif into the contact period. Another such figure is incised on a ceramic sherd from Martha's Vineyard dating from 800 A.D. to 1300 A.D. (Petersen cited in Hedden 1991:44). Similar designs have been located from Holt's Point, New Brunswick, to Thunder Bay, Michigan (Cleland, et al. 1984). Many of these designs have been found on shale disks, some worn as crevices, associated with the haunts of guardian spirits and mythological beings, and with their emergence from the underworld or sky world. (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:48). Snow attributes the marked prominence of sexual motifs at Solon to the strong associations between shamanism and eroticism (1976). Likewise, Vastokas and Vastokas suggest for the Peterborough petroglyphs, "the site itself, a pierced and perforated rock, may be read as an ideal feminine symbol; it is a symbolic uterus and a means of access for the shaman to the hidden power or sexual though handled frequently. They are frequently found near bodies of water" (Hedden 1991:47).

The interpretation of these pictographs is fraught with problems, including the difficulties of dating them, the possibility of fraud and damage, limited direct historical information about their use, and their place in the unsavory history of racist interpretations of art. In general they have been interpreted as illustrating shamanistic visions, as part of hunting magic, and/or as marking rites of passage. In southern New England, the shamanistic interpretations of rock art are most compelling. Vastokas and Vastokas argue that among Algonquian speakers, "the sites chosen for such significant images included rocky cliffs, boulders, and outcroppings with clefts, holes, or energy of nature upon which he can draw for the benefit of mankind" (1973:89). Several of the markings on the Dighton Rock might have a similar interpretation.

Hedden and others have suggested that such images are associated with shamanic activities—and constitute part of the ritual knowledge passed from shaman to initiate. Such images may have been mnemonic devices in learning songs and chants, references to sacred knowledge, and signs of special status vis-a-vis the supernatural world (Hedden 1991:47). According to Hedden, "the birdlike aspect of many of the images is consistent with shamanistic concepts of (spiritual, out of body) flight, and more particularly with the perceived function of shaman as intermediary between spirits of the heavens and the deeps and his people" (Hedden 1991:47).

The images also express a more abstract shamanistic ideology. In several of the triangular-torsoed figures described above, "the interior pattern in the chest area corresponds with many ideographic representations dating from at least 1200 A.D. in the Great Lakes area of the cosmic tree which connects the heavens and the deeps to the plane of the earth. The ladderlike series of horizontal lines in the upper chest area may express a concept, present in but not limited to Algonkian cosmology, of several ranked tiers of progressively more powerful and remote spiritual powers in the heavens" (Cleland, et al. 1984).

Shamans in southern New England were called powwows. Williams recorded two terms for such a person, *powwaw*, "their priest" and *maunetu*, "a conjurer" (1936:198). In 1761 Ezra

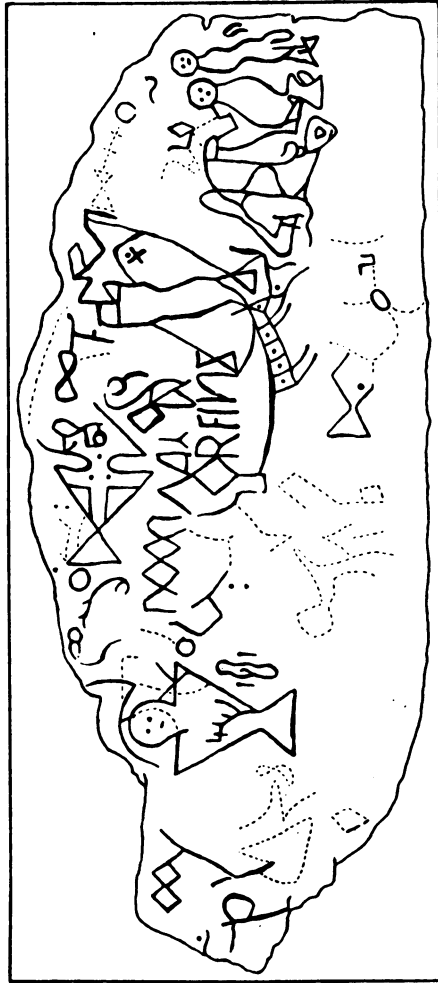


Figure 3: Dighton Rock petroglyph (Delabarre 1928).

Stiles visited two native women near Niantic, Connecticut and learned that “the Nehantics named their Pawawen, Mondtu. By this Name they call themselves & the Supreme Diety.” Stiles was also told that there might be ten or twelve powwaws in a community of three or four hundred people. (quoted in Sturtevant 1975:440). Although the natives of southern New England recognized two or three classes of humans distinguished by their “consorting” with other-than-human beings, or the spiritual force known as manitou, the powwaw was separated from ordinary vision seekers by the power of his or her visions, and the fact that their spirit-helpers came unsolicited. Powwaws were involuntarily summoned by the powerful manitou Abbomacho, or Chepi, who often took the form of a snake, or other supernatural beings, who appeared to them in dreams. Powwaws told John Eliot, for example, that “if any one of the Indians fall into any strange dreame wherein *Chepian* appears unto them as a serpent, then the next day they tell the other Indians of it...” who “dance and rejoyce for what they tell them about this Serpent, and so they become their Powwaws...” (Wilson 1834:19–20). A Martha’s Vineyard powwaw told one Englishman that he encountered four beings in a dream, and one:

was like a man which he saw in the Ayre, and this told him that he did know all things upon the island, and what was to be done; and this he said had its residence over his whole body. Another was like a Crow, and did look out sharply to discover mischiefs coming towards him, and had its residence in his head. The third was like to a pidgeon, and had its place in his breast, and was very cunning about any businesse. The fourth was like a serpent, very subtile to doe mischief, and also to doe great cures, and these he said were meer Devills, and such as he has trusted to for safety, and did labour to raise up for the accomplishment of any thing in his diabolicall craft. (Whitfield 1834:186)

Evidence such as this indicates that shamanistic activities were congruent with the pictographic images, which seem to focus on transformative experiences, and relations with manitous taking various animal forms.

The widespread occurrence of similar signs throughout southern New England suggests that the shamanic pictographs were indexical or symbolic as opposed to strictly representational or iconic (Peirce 1991:239). The probability that their meanings were shared regionally is further supported by the changes in style of pictographs through time, from “naturalistic” to abstract in all areas where such pictographs are found (Heddon 1991:44).

The distribution of petroglyphs in southern New England suggests that the images themselves were accessible to wayfarers, especially those travelling by boat. Delabarre has documented the distribution of pictograph sites in southern New England and has demonstrated a remarkable clustering in the Taunton/Blackstone river drainage. Other pictograph sites, and many amulets with pictographic images have also been found near navigable water. Widespread similarities in pictographic signs suggests well-established communicative networks, also presumably supported by water travel, among shamans.

The “lexicon” associated with these images is difficult to determine. Certainly the natives of southern New England were accustomed to “reading” images on pottery, clothing, and even on the human body. Early commentators noted their habit of depicting “antic” animal figures on cloaks, belts, and with body paint or tattoos. William Wood recalled that “many of

the better sort [bear] upon their cheeks certain portraitures of beasts, as bears, deers, mooses, wolves, etc. some of fowls, as of eagles, hawks, etc... [W]hether these be foils to illustrate their unparalleled beauty (as them deem it) or arms to blazon their antique gentility, I cannot easily determine" (1977:85). These "portraitures" may also have been the prized marks of sacred experience, marking, like pictographs, encounters with manitou and transformative experience.

In summary, rock art in southern New England appears to have had the following characteristics: It was probably shamanic in association, with an emphasis on transformative states and the thresholds (or boundaries) between worlds. It referenced communication with the denizens of all worlds, sky, water, and earth, marking the landscape features chosen as rock art sites as liminal thresholds between those worlds. It was memorial, in that it documented specific soul flights or transformations or encounters with manitous. It was abstract, employing condensed symbolism such as the "ladder" or world tree motif. It was also adumbrative, not to be read as a narrative, but perhaps as a "conversation." Widespread similarities in location and imagery suggests a general regional understanding of the significance and meaning of pictographs, a similarity, which it is important to note, does not require linguistic overlap, just as the Chinese pictographic writing system was "read" by speakers of several distinct languages.

I have argued elsewhere that early seventeenth-century native communities in southern New England were characterized by multilingualism, a situation conducive to "open" political and social boundaries (Bragdon 1993). This same "openness" seems to be reflected archaeologically in the widespread use of similar ceramic types, tools and other material remains throughout the region in the terminal Late Woodland period. The similarities in pictographic motifs throughout New England during the same period seem to reinforce this view. The shamanic and ecstatic quality of the pictographic "texts" also reflects an emphasis on shamanic ritual, usually associated with communities for whom social boundaries are "weak" (Douglas 1970).

The visual pictographic literacy associated with rock art in southern New England can be profitably contrasted with the alphabetic literacy in Massachusetts which developed in the mid-seventeenth century. Native society underwent considerable change with the appropriation of their territories by English settlers, particularly after the settlement of Boston and its environs in the 1630's. The "great migration" of that decade contributed to the weakening of traditional political and social alliances already underway as the result of massive population loss in the "plague years" of 1617–1619. Attenuated communities of Massachusetts-speakers survived in what is now southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, on Cape Cod, and on the Islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Previous widespread interaction, including intermarriage, multilingualism, and trade among native peoples was increasingly limited as a result of population loss, isolation, and the "divide and conquer" methods of colonial governments.

The surviving natives of Massachusetts Bay came under the increasing influence of English missionaries who sought the establishment of settled "praying towns" where Christianized natives might be educated and "civilized." Some of these communities, such as Natick, were organized as utopian enclaves made up of believers gathered from many

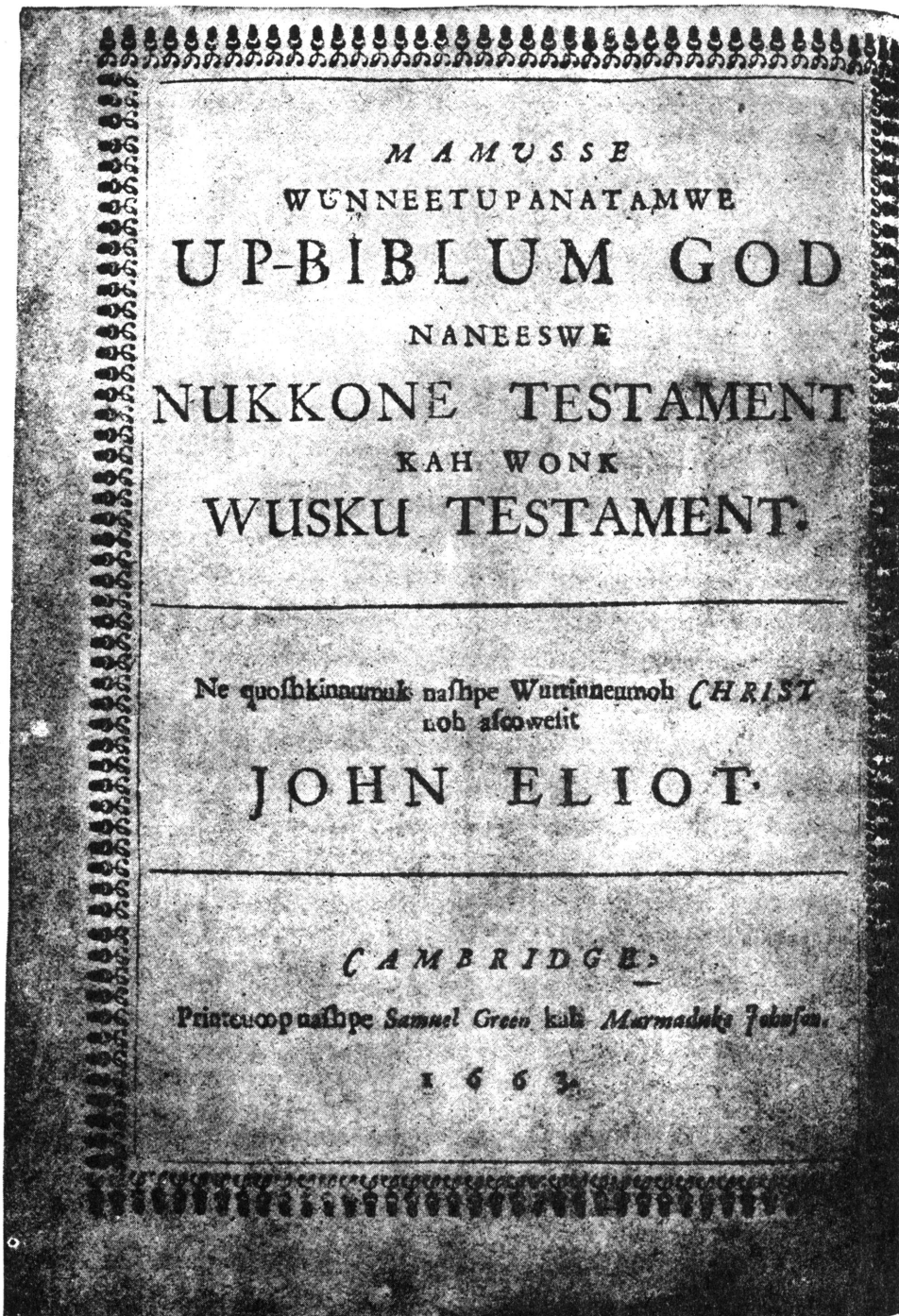


Figure 4: Title page from Mamusse Wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblum God translated by John Eliot, 1685 (Pilling 1891).



disparate communities, while others were traditional “sachemships” reconstituted as Christian towns. The unique coincidence of the native emphasis on public speaking and speech as an art-form with the Puritan text-dominated missionary effort created the conditions for a new kind of literacy within these native Christian communities.

The “print” culture of Puritanism in the seventeenth century led John Eliot and other missionaries, funded by the Society for the Propagation of the Bible, to develop the justly famous “Indian Library,” translations of the Bible, and other Puritan-inspired religious works into Massachusetts (Pilling 1891; Eliot 1663, 1685) (Figure 4). Eliot also embarked on a vigorous campaign of education in native literacy, developing a Roman-based orthography suited to the sound system of Massachusetts, and amenable to rapid learning, and easily printed as well (Eliot 1666). The small cadre of English missionaries dedicated to introducing vernacular literacy into native communities were soon joined by a larger number of native teachers who taught reading and writing skills throughout the region, such that by the end of the seventeenth century nearly 30% of the native population, men, women, and children, could read and write (Bragdon 1981:55).

Massachusetts vernacular literacy embraced several activities, cross-cutting a number of traditional cultural domains. In formal schools, and at home, students worked with primers and other teaching aids, and studied translated texts. Literate individuals, usually men, kept a variety of records, including marriage records, deeds, and town proprietors’s records. Native officials published marriage banns and issued warrants. One diary or account book in Massachusetts is known, and letters were also exchanged (Goddard and Bragdon 1988:13–23).

But literacy’s most prominent use in daily life was the associated with the practice of native christianity. Private meditations and reading were common among all literate practitioners. Much reading and writing were taught within the context of religious instruction, or in preparation for it. Those native students who were educated by private tutors and at Harvard’s Indian College were destined for the ministry as well.

Strong evidence suggests such religiously-oriented literacy was highly public and social in nature. Native and English ministers alike incorporated biblical texts into their sermons. The service itself consisted of reading, response, and textual exegesis (Bragdon 1991). Annotations from the majority of surviving native-owned bibles indicates that the bibles themselves were shared, and referred to during the service, and that the endpapers and other blank portions of the printed pages served as the location for commentary on the “lessons” of the day. Literacy had become a generalized skill, partaken of by all members of the community, and linking them with the “outside world” of English beliefs and practices, but at the same time, further separating them from non-literate natives in other communities.

The contrast between the shamanistic texts and those associated with alphabetic literacy in Massachusetts lies in the actors, audience, and the nature of symbolic expression—but it is also associated with the social relations which obtained in sixteenth-century native society and in that of the late seventeenth century. I argue here, following Mary Douglas, that if ecstatic trance and shamanic possession are associated with loose social boundaries, one might expect a visual “jargon” wherein symbols were indexical and symbolic, condensed and polysemous. In social conditions of closed social boundaries, on the other hand,

such as those which obtained in the late seventeenth century, a language-specific literacy might flourish.

This increasing differentiation of communities and the tightening of social boundaries may also have been reflected in material remains as well. Kevin McBride (personal communication 1993) documents increasingly visible differences in intra-site settlement pattern, and ceramics between coastal Connecticut and Rhode Island in the seventeenth century, reflecting, presumably, increasingly marked ethnic and political differences by the mid-seventeenth century.

The relationship between literacy and material culture is one that has received little attention from scholars. I suggest that the relationships between social boundedness and various kinds of "literacies" are significant, and are reflected (among other things) in material remains on regional scale. The relationship between the "written" and the "wrought" therefore, is one of both form and content, with the forms of literacy reflecting social relations in much the same way that widescale archaeological patterns are wont to do.

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