

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620-1984. By William S. Simmons.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0vf944jv>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 14(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Parks, Douglas R.

Publication Date

1990

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

rus hide covering becomes waterlogged and has to be dried. It also has to be replaced every two or three years.

Braund's text is straightforward, although sometimes repetitious, and it is enhanced with excellent diagrams and photographs. There are three useful appendices: a glossary of Siberian Yupik words pertaining to skin boats; a listing of the number of skin boat crews on Saint Lawrence Island between 1970 and 1980; a series of photographs taken in 1938, by Father Bernard R. Hubbard, of the building of a round-bottom skin boat on King Island. Braund's commentary and captions explain how the construction differs from that of Saint Lawrence Island boats, because the King Islanders have no beach but must launch and land their boats from rocky cliffs.

Most other recent publications on Eskimo skin boats—for example, those by E. Y. Arima or D. W. Zimmerly—concentrate on the kayak rather than the open boat or, if they treat the open boat, are not as detailed—for example, the classic work on all native North American boats by E. T. Adney and H. I. Chapelle, or the historic account of the canoe by K. G. Roberts and P. Shackleton. The publications of L. Ellana and S. Bogojavlensky stress the social and economic aspects of skin boat hunting in the Bering Sea and Strait, but do not give the kind of sharply focused historical and technological detail that Braund has provided so successfully.

Catharine McClellan
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620–1984. By William S. Simmons. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986. 331 pages. \$35.00 Cloth. \$15.95 Paper.

Although decimated by disease and overrun by the force of European settlement, the Indian tribes of southern New England—the Massachusetts, Wampanoag, Mashpee, Gay Head, Narragansett, and Mohegan—have persisted in the area of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut for three centuries, and many of their descendants maintain Indian identities to the present day. In this volume, William Simmons gathers together folklore from each of these groups that dates from earlier European contact and

continues to the present, and analyzes this discrete and manageable body of material to identify the symbols expressing Indian identity over time. In the author's words, the "overall aim is to represent the symbolism, worldview, we might say spirit, of the New England tribes in the context of their material and historic existence" (page vii).

The author's method is to assemble as full a corpus as possible of folkloric material from these tribes. He has searched exhaustively both the published and unpublished literature, and has supplemented it with interviews, between 1981 and 1984, with various contemporary New England Indians. The end result is an impressive compilation of some 240 texts, beginning with Indian traditions recorded by the Puritans and continuing through time with the writings of Indian people themselves, as well as those of anthropologists such as Frank Speck. An index of these texts, compiled according to folklore motifs, is presented at the back of the book.

As Simmons notes, this material is distinctive, representing "one of the oldest continually recorded bodies of Indian folklore known in North America"; moreover, this book is doubtlessly "the longest term historical study of oral narratives" in the literature (page 8). However, the material consists largely of fragments, most recorded by whites only in outline form, and often reworked in the process. By and large, their written versions give synopses of plots and folklore motifs, providing little more than fleeting glimpses of Indian cultures and the context of folklore in daily life. More insightful are those writings by people of New England Indian ancestry, notably Gladys Tantaquidgeon, an elderly Mohegan who, inspired by Speck, collected New England Indian folklore during the 1920s and 1930s.

The study begins with a summary of the history of the southern New England tribes and traces them from first European contact to their modern descendants. It forms a helpful backdrop to the comparative presentation that follows, based on material from each of these groups. To provide an appropriate ethnographic context for the analysis of folklore, Simmons next turns to a synthesis of the worldview of the southern New England Indians during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Drawing his data from the admittedly biased writings of the Puritans, the author reconstructs an ethnohistorical account of New England Indian culture, carefully evaluating each of his

sources. He relies on anthropological insights from the comparative study of North American Indian culture to reconstruct the parameters of an Indian cultural universe only vaguely understood by European observers. The dominant themes in his discussion are religious: the pantheon, shamanism, and a variety of rituals.

Following this introductory material is the heart of the book, a sequence of chapters presenting the corpus of folklore texts organized thematically under such headings as "First Europeans," "Christianity," "Shamans," and "Witches, Giants, and Little People." (A small number of texts that do not fit neatly into any of these types are given in an appendix.) Each chapter is arranged chronologically, thereby illustrating the historical development of the theme from the seventeenth century to the present. For example, the chapter on the first Europeans begins with a 1634 account of the encounter: "They took the first ship they saw for a walking island, the mast to be a tree, the sail white clouds, and the discharging of ordnance for lightning and thunder" (page 66), approaching it fearfully after the ship had fired its salute. By the 1920s, in contrast, much of the mystery of the first encounter had been lost, and tales were told of the prophecy of an elderly chief who, on his deathbed, predicted the coming of the white people and warned against giving them land (page 72).

The book concludes with a chapter that summarizes the surviving elements of aboriginal tradition, arguing that those symbols that persist through time spring from the deepest Indian identity and are nurtured in the context of social cohesiveness, where people of Indian descent maintained distinct boundaries to separate themselves from the larger white society. At Gay Head, on a remote peninsula of Martha's Vineyard, the descendants of the Wampanoag today represent the strongest survival of Indian tradition, which the author correlates directly with their social isolation and internal cohesion. Other communities, less socially bounded, have preserved fewer survivals. For all the groups, however, Simmons notes that the closer one gets to the present, the more Indian folklore becomes like that of the larger society. This he attributes not to random borrowing, but to specific turning points in the history of New England Indian society, including the wars with the English during the seventeenth century (resulting in loss of confidence in traditional beliefs), acceptance

of Christianity (representing the displacement of traditional religion), political events such as allotment of land to individuals (resulting in detribalization), and the Indian Reorganization Act (leading to a resurgence of Indian identity). Whatever its context, Simmons argues that New England Indian folklore "is the major vehicle for expressing and perpetuating a persistent Indian identity" (page 267). It provides a key for understanding their history and represents the primary survival of "an Indian spirit" (page 270).

This book is a model of careful scholarship, demonstrating the potential value of the ethnohistorical study of folklore, an approach that has not been explored by students of American Indian oral traditions. As in many studies of contemporary American Indian ethnicity, for an explanation of continuity Simmons has drawn on Edward Spicer's concept of "persistent identity systems," but he has done so creatively, rather than mechanically and, in the symbolic context of folklore, has offered valuable new insights. This is a volume whose methodology deserves emulation.

Douglas R. Parks
Indiana University