

Abenaki Indian families, tribes, bands, and legislation

Guest Editorial

In 2006, the state of Vermont adopted legislation to formally "recognize" Abenaki people and establish the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs (VCNAA). The Legislature entrusted VCNAA with the task of devising a process for recognizing Abenaki artisans, but the efforts to legislate Indian identity have not met with widespread acceptance. My personal opinion is that the current impasse stems, in part, from widespread confusion about the roles that the state of Vermont, the Attorney General, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Vermont legislators, the VCNAA, or any state agency should play in "recognizing" Indian tribes.

Traditional Native American Indian tribes are not, in essence, entities created by non-Native states and nations. One does not become an "Indian" by simply joining a hobbyist or fraternal group. One cannot be legislatively transformed into ethnic "Indian-ness." Nor does one cease being "Indian" after being denied recognition by a state or federal agency. Native people are "Indian" by virtue of their kinship with Native families, bands, or tribes with distinctive oral traditions, cultural practices, links to particular landscapes or homelands, and systems of governance. These cultural and political markers are not always clearly visible to outsiders.

The traditional structure of Abenaki governance, as scholars of Algonkian history have long observed (e.g. Frank Speck, Irving Hallowell, Colin Calloway, David Stewart Smith, John Moody, etc. etc.), is the family band, a grouping that, among Algonkian peoples, can range in size from a small extended family (5-10 individuals) to a cluster of families forming a larger band (30-300 or more individuals). Some Abenaki families have been in the location now known as "Vermont" for generations. Some have shifted back and forth across international and state borders over time, or bonded together after colonial displacements. There is no firm consensus among anthropologists, federal agencies, or Native Americans about the precise distinction between a "band" and a "tribe," or the exact size of a "tribe." Nor is there a single tribal genealogist who can document the precise history and ancestry of every single Abenaki family.

The BIA federal recognition protocols expect a Native "tribe" to be associated with a fixed location, to have a recognizeably democratic system of governance, and to be documented for decades (by their white neighbors) as having been visibly authentic "Indians." This federal model of the "tribe" tends to privilege highly visible post-colonial groups that live on reservations. That being said, there is no question in my mind that the St. Francis Sokoki Band of the Abenaki Nation at Missisquoi is an "Indian tribe." Nor is there any question in my mind that the Lampman, St. Francis, Obomsawin and other Abenaki families in the state fit the model of "family bands." Why, then, is the current picture so confusing?

For generations, Abenaki families and tribes have been gathering together and splitting apart, making alliances to benefit their own needs and purposes at different times. In a curious sense, speaking as an anthropologist, this shifting and recombining is natural, since Algonkian models of governance (colloquially called "voting with your feet") allowed family bands to combine or separate, as necessary, to cope with seasonal changes or outside threats. In the modern world, these patterns of autonomy and negotiated dependence persist, but they are bewildering to outside observers. Abenaki individuals and families may seem to be taking contradictory stances while claiming similar goals, based on their own perceptions of the best course for survival.

Situations like these call for compassion and sensitivity to the interpersonal dynamics of Native people who have been forced to live for generations under the hostile intent, colonizing policies, and racism of their non-Native neighbors. When there is too much pressure from outside forces, it is (sadly) not at all unusual for Native people to engage in "lateral violence," where people turn against one another when they feel powerless to overcome a dominant enemy. In this struggle, Vermont state officials are not neutral parties.

In retrospect, the current problem would not be with us if Gov. Thomas Salmon's 1976 Executive Order recognizing the Abenaki in Vermont had not been overturned by Gov. Richard Snelling. For a comparative example of how this might have worked, one need only look to the state of Massachusetts. In 1976, Gov. Michael Dukakis's Executive Order recognized the historic Nipmuc and Wampanoag people and established the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs. The MCIA has been extremely effective in working with Native families, bands, and tribes, assisting them with education, housing, arts, and burial protection, and they are now developing a new Native American Institute for education at UMass Boston. Vermont, however, is stuck in the past, still fighting its old Indian wars.

Since so many Abenaki families will be affected by whatever actions are taken at this time, it breaks my heart to see so much public arguing and divisiveness. It is my sincere hope that, eventually, somebody in the state of Vermont will be able to craft a peaceful and equitable solution to serve all of the state's resident Abenaki families, bands, and tribes, no matter how large or small they might seem to be. It is also my hope that the family kin networks will continue functioning as they have for centuries, in healing ways that will protect and preserve our homeland - Ndakinna - for those who come after us.

**Wli nanawalmezi, be well,
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