

European Perspectives on Native American Magic

By Hollie Dalton

After arriving in America, early European settlers began a volatile relationship with Native Americans that would span centuries. Events such as the Salem Witch Trials exemplified the strong fears Europeans held toward magic. Yet, the attitudes toward Native American magical practices were regarded with little to no fear by European settlers. Native American persecution (and subsequent executions) occurred for several reasons; however, the fear of their magic and rituals were not at the forefront of those concerns.

By looking further into this subject matter, I hope to uncover why. I aim to build a complete narrative by using both Native American and European writings to understand Native American magic as well as the European perspective. By conducting this research, I will uncover why early European settlers viewed Native magic the way they did.

Relationship Origins

In 1607, the English established, what would become, a permanent community on the east coast; this community would become Jamestown, Virginia. Establishing this colony was not without challenges. Before docking, the English were attacked by Native Americans (Dennis 2003, 21). This was a natural response, considering how the Natives were treated by previous Spanish explorers.

This was only the beginning of a long and troublesome affair. An affair that continues today, in some capacity. The treacherous relationship between Native Americans and European settlers is more of interest to scholars. Much of that focus is dedicated to disease, famine, and warfare, but little attention is given to how an issue like witchcraft impacted that relationship.



Drawing of the colony established in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607.

Religion

At this time, Christianity was the religion; while religious wars did occur as more sects of Christianity were established. Religious freedom drove thousands to establish colonies in America, and as more cropped up along the east coast, religions like Protestantism, Anglicanism, Catholicism, and others flourished. While not all of these religions co-existed in peace, nothing was worse than stepping outside the sphere of Christianity.

The Native Americans did not share the same religious beliefs and practices as the European settlers. In such a troubling time, filled with disease and starvation, missionary work took a back seat until the English were more settled.

According to Matthew Dennis' "American Indians, Witchcraft, and Witch-hunting," witchcraft and other magical practices were a part of everyday life for Native Americans and the colonists. The land in which the Native Americans inhabited was known as a "'devil's den,'" (Dennis 2003, 21) and Shamans were equated to "slaves of Satan." (Dennis 2003, 21)

Missionary Work

Those like Jesuit missionary and ethnographer, **Father Joseph-François Lafitau**, worked closely with the Iroquois (a Native American tribe). The knowledge of witchcraft (and witches) mostly came from the European missionaries, like Lafitau, converting Native Americans to Christianity. While conversion was not always a complete process, some portions of Christianity influenced the Native American beliefs.

Naturally, the evils which befell the Native Americans following the European's arrival (failure of crops, disease) were equated with witches or the Devil. Some thought the witches were the Europeans, however, many also believed it was completely unrelated to the European's arrival and was instead their fellow tribal members.

Lafitau wrote about the Iroquois and their relationships with sorcerers within their own community. He noted that there was a clear distinction between shamans and sorcerers. Those that cast spells did so for the harm of others. These sorcerers were ostracized within the Iroquois community and even executed in some instances (Dennis 2003, 22).

“‘Shaman’ is an umbrella term used by anthropologists to describe a vast collection of practices and beliefs, many of which have to do with divination, spirit communication, and magic.” (Wigington 2019)

In this case, shamans refer to medicine men or highly trained spiritual figures.

WHY THE IROQUOIS TURNED TO MAGIC

The avoidance of outward expressions of conflict, Iroquois men and women repressed their aggression, but such feelings could still simmer below the surface, waiting for opportunities to express themselves. Witchcraft offered a covert, wicked means to assault antagonists within Iroquois communities, to indulge one's sense of resentment, rivalry, jealousy, even hatred in secret ways." (Dennis 2003, 22)

Despite trying to teach Native Americans the ways of Christianity, the instances of witchcraft within the tribes (like the Iroquois) were not met with persecutions or executions as they were in Europe. This quote from Matthew Dennis' "American Indians, Witchcraft, and Witch-hunting" could explain why:

"It was a contest of power (even magic), and in the minds of Europeans it pit a stronger god against a weaker one. Against Christ, Indian gods - and devils - were simply overmatched. This providential view of triumphant European colonization would continue to set the tone for European American understanding of Indian religion in subsequent eras." (Dennis 2003, 21)

As noted in *Witchcraft and the Colonization of Algonquian and Iroquois Cultures*, European settlers thought Native rituals "were exercises in Devil worship and a means of obtaining the Devil's power." (Porterfield 1992, 104) By this logic, their colonization was just; not only were they exploring and modernizing an "untouched land," they were also ridding the 'inferior' Native tribes of the Devil (104).

COTTON MATHER

Despite the English not hesitating to slaughter entire tribes for less, the threat of witchcraft from the Native Americans did not warrant mass-slaughters. Instead, missionaries worked to convert the Native Americans to Christianity. Perhaps they believed the Native Americans were too misguided or ignorant to truly be a threat and that is why missionary work was assigned. Maybe the inter-tribe executions of accused witches was enough to prove the Native's dedication to good rather than evil?

While this belief may have been popular with some settlers, it was not a universal belief. Cotton Mather a "prominent Bostonian minister and author" (Ray) worked closely with the Salem witch-trials. His unwavering opinions on good and evil, by the University of Virginia's assessment, "heavily swayed the directions of the trial proceedings and the executions. (Ray) These beliefs encapsulated standard Puritan values; evil, demons, and the Devil all had direct influence on the physical world (Ray). Mather also believed in the devilishness of Native Americans.

"The story of the prodigious war, made by the spirits of the invisible world upon the people of New-England, in the year 1692, hath entertain'd a great part of the English world with a just astonishment. And I have met with some strange things, not here to me mentioned, which have made me often think that this inexplicable war might have some of its original among the Indians, whose chief sagamores are well known unto some of our captives to have been horrid sorcerers, and hellish conjurers, and such as conversed with demons."
(Mather 620)

Tituba, an enslaved woman, was the first accused during the Salem witch-trials. She was owned by Samuel Parris, the father of the first girls afflicted by witchcraft (Schiff 2015). Though Native American (most likely hailing from South American), she was falsely portrayed as a black woman in the novel "The Crucible" (Schiff 2015). This misrepresentation has led many (for years) to believe she was an African slave. While it is not fully known why Tituba was accused, based on the close relationship she had with the two Parris daughter, and being Native American, it is not as outlandish as some scholars may assert. With Native Americans being considered so devilish and dangerous, why wouldn't Tituba be named? As a Native American that was extremely close to the girls, Tituba was an easy target.

It appears the actual religious practices of the Native Americans were not, inherently, considered evil by the Puritans. Instead, it was the threat of their 'wildness' and uncivilized way of life (in comparison to the English) that garnered suspicion and even hatred. Any magic – diabolical in nature – performed by the Native Americans were few and far between. In the case of Iroquois, these individuals were taken care of (often executed) by their own tribes. The fear of witchcraft appears to be an issue race does not often cross (Tituba being an exception). The colonist's fear of witchcraft, evil, and the Devil influenced Native Americans to look within themselves for these evils.

**Drawing of the
Cotton Mather**



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