

Historical Revisionism: from Thanksgiving to the National Day of Mourning

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Abstract

The holiday of Thanksgiving is very important to many Americans, but hurtful to many Native Americans, as the mythology of the holiday is highly one-sided. This study aims to provide a more inclusive history of Thanksgiving and to place its counter-tradition the National Day of Mourning in the context of other forms of Native American activism in the 1960s and 1970s. To do this, I did a close reading of academic texts and other sources about Thanksgiving, the National Day of Mourning, and other forms of Native American activism. I worked with historical revisionism, as this aims to provide a more balanced history in order to accomplish inclusivity. My analysis shows that the holiday and myth of Thanksgiving misrepresented and left out the experiences of the Wampanoag and instead celebrates their losses of lands, genocide, and oppression. The National Day of Mourning is a counter-tradition of the celebration of Thanksgiving that is both connected to other forms of Native American activism (AIM) and an independent form of protest. The National Day of Mourning continues to be of importance to Indigenous Peoples both nationally and internationally, as it still aims to educate non-Native people, honor the ancestors, and protest the ongoing racism towards Native Americans. I conclude that the celebration of Thanksgiving should be revised, so that the Wampanoag are accurately acknowledged. It is important to celebrate a more inclusive version of Thanksgiving, so that the National Day of Mourning will not be necessary anymore in the future.

Keywords: Thanksgiving, national narratives, Red Power movement, National Day of Mourning, historical revisionism

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Introduction

On October 8, 2021, American President Joe Biden held two proclamations: one for Columbus Day and one for Indigenous Peoples' Day. He became the first president to commemorate Indigenous Peoples' Day on the day that has been Columbus Day since President Franklyn D. Roosevelt made it a national holiday in 1934 (Scott; Blakemore). President Biden seeks to celebrate both Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples' Day simultaneously, recognizing both the Italian American contributions to American society and the painful history of brutality against Native Americans (Biden, Indigenous Peoples' Day). Columbus Day celebrates Christopher Columbus' arrival in and discovery of the Americas and the following transformation of the United States from "uncivilized" to "the great nation it has become" (Eason et al. 2).

The counter-movement of Columbus Day, however, argues that with the arrival of Columbus to the Americas, a system of violence, displacement, and theft of land was inflicted on the Native Americans that had a devastating impact (Laduke 19-20; Means; Means and Wolf 1218). Even though several states have already celebrated Indigenous Peoples' Day on Columbus Day as a result of the counter-movement by several Indigenous Peoples, President Biden's official acknowledgement of Indigenous Peoples' Day has serious consequences as it did not only end with words. Biden has already presented several policies designed specifically for Native Americans that aim to improve tribal transportation and water infrastructure, and to protect three national monuments (Bowman; Davidson).

Indigenous Peoples' Day is a form of revisionist history, which is the revision of historical narratives. This is done by critically re-evaluating historical narratives and supporting historical claims with evidence (Krasner 15). It is a practice that historians need to do in order to come up with a more truthful historical narrative, by looking at the historical facts that have been neglected (Krasner 77). Historical revisionism can be both positive and negative, as it can add the perspectives of the Indigenous Peoples to a historical narrative, but it can also be used by political leaders with political agendas who twist facts to achieve their political goals. This practice was used in the past, when minority perspectives, cultures, and languages were given no attention. Examples of this erasure of perspectives include the denial of the Holocaust and the disregard of Indigenous perspectives during the colonization (Krasner 79-80). When done with the right

intentions, historical revisionism can provide a more inclusive and diverse history, by adding the perspectives of the Indigenous Peoples (Krasner 15; Weiser 107-8).

Like Columbus Day, the national holiday Thanksgiving has revisionist counterparts as well, which includes the National Day of Mourning. This counter-tradition is not as influential and wide-spread as Indigenous Peoples' Day yet, but it is nevertheless important for Native Americans, especially the Wampanoag people from Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The National Day of Mourning has been held each year on Thanksgiving since 1970 (Weiss 368). It is important for the present and future of the United States to recognize the often disregarded and painful history of colonization and to include the Indigenous Peoples' perspectives in their national narratives. This recognition will be inevitable if the United States wants to reduce the divisions that already exist in the American society (Rowley 16). I hope to contribute to the greater visibility of Indigenous Peoples' perspectives on the history of Thanksgiving and the National Day of Mourning through the following research question: Why is Thanksgiving offensive to Native Americans, especially the Wampanoag people, and how is the National Day of Mourning connected to other forms of Native American activism in the period between 1960 and today? What I will be researching are the origins and development of Thanksgiving as a national myth; the role that the Wampanoag played in the origin story; and the mythologizing of Thanksgiving. I will then research the origins and development of the counter-tradition the National Day of Mourning and place it in the wider context of Native American activism of the 1960s and 1970s.

In order to shed a new and more inclusive light on the origins of the national holiday and myth of Thanksgiving, it will be necessary to do historical research on the origins of Thanksgiving, the National Day of Mourning, and other Native American activism of the 1960s and 1970s. This will involve a close reading of both primary and secondary sources on these topics. These sources include academic articles, books, and journals from the university library that deal with topics, such as settler colonialism, historical revisionism regarding Thanksgiving, Native American activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and nation building. Academic research on the National Day of Mourning as a counter-holiday of Thanksgiving is rather rare. There have been a few scholars that have researched Thanksgiving and its counter-holiday, including historians Jana Weiss, Matthew Rowley, and David Silverman. As scholarship on the National Day of Mourning is

scarce, I will critically analyze and use non-academic sources, such as official Wampanoag websites, newspaper articles, and a documentary series about the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving. I will use these sources by closely reading them and adding the information that they bring to the discussion of the topics of the origin story of Thanksgiving and its development as a national narrative. I will also use them to place the National Day of Mourning into the context of the other forms of Native American activism of that time. In doing so, I aim to provide a more inclusive discussion of Thanksgiving by using historical revisionist sources. These sources have challenged historical narratives and theories, by testing their accuracy based on sources and voices that were not included in the historical narrative. The inclusive discussion of Thanksgiving will also involve the addition of the experiences of the Indigenous Peoples in the national narrative of Thanksgiving and the impact it has had on them (Krasner 15), by adding an analysis of the origins and context of National Day of Mourning.

The research question will be answered in three chapters. The first chapter will be a literature review of the historical revisionist sources that have contributed to the greater visibility of Indigenous experiences in the Thanksgiving myth, both in its origin story and in the way it is celebrated. This will provide a background of national narratives in general, the Thanksgiving myth, and its counter-tradition the National Day of Mourning.

Chapter two is going to answer the subquestion: What were the origins and development of Thanksgiving as a national holiday and myth? This is the chapter in which I will focus on the emergence and development of Thanksgiving as a national holiday and myth by analyzing the Pilgrim story and the Mayflower myth. I will continue with the Wampanoag people to explain who they are and what their role was in the first Thanksgiving and in the creation of the Thanksgiving holiday and myth and how they were represented in this. This section will be accompanied with a discussion of the way national narratives are used to create a national identity and how they inherently exclude other perspectives.

Chapter three will be led by the subquestion: Why and how did the National Day of Mourning emerge as a counter-tradition in response to Thanksgiving? The ‘why’ question will deal with a discussion of the Wampanoag nations’ perspectives on the history of Thanksgiving and how this has led to the National Day of Mourning in 1970. The ‘how’ question will contextualize the National Day of Mourning by placing it into the context of the broader Native

American activism of the 1960s and 1970s by the American Indian Movement, for instance. The National Day of Mourning will be placed within the context of the Native American activism of this time, with a specific focus on the Alcatraz occupation of 1969, as this had a great impact on other forms of Native American activism and the development of pan-Indian activism (Strange and Loo 57-61; Weiss 373-4).

In the conclusion I will briefly summarize my findings and I will look at the future of Thanksgiving as a national holiday and give suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

Not much scholarly literature is written about the National Day of Mourning as a counter-tradition of Thanksgiving, which reflects the underrepresentation of Indigenous perspectives in American history and national narratives. One great article written by the German North American history professor Jana Weiss (2018) is one of the few articles that really focuses on the counter-tradition of Thanksgiving. She uses the Thanksgiving myth as a case study to explain the functions of civil religion, in which religion and politics are closely intertwined, and it places the nation's history in a religious framework (Weiss 369). This study adds to our understanding of myths by highlighting the role of civil religion in national narratives and myths, as it creates a national identity, can shape memory, and can legitimize political agendas (Weiss 369-71). This in turn explains why myths such as Thanksgiving are so prevalent in American society. Weiss continues her article with a discussion of Native American activism during the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, and especially the protests on Thanksgiving. She argues that the protest against Thanksgiving started in the middle of the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, which attracted much attention from the media. During the occupation in 1969, many Indigenous people announced that Thanksgiving that year was a day of "Un-Thanksgiving" (Weiss 373-4). Weiss does not, however, make entirely clear how she sees the connection between the since 1975 yearly celebrated "Un-Thanksgiving" on the west coast and the since 1970 annual National Day of Mourning on the east coast, as she says that it was the start of it, but she does not explain how exactly.

Whereas Weiss stressed the importance of civil religion in myths, the study by Eason et al. (2021) focuses on national narratives, which they define as culturally constructed stories of the founding of the nation (Eason et al. 2). The two concepts are related, but they both give different insights in myths and holidays such as Columbus Day and Thanksgiving. This psychology study has found three effects of national narratives: they create a sense of attachment and pride towards the nation, which is beneficial for people's well-being, they unify people around a common goal or identity, such as conflict or policies, and finally they offer people hope for the future in hard times (Eason et al. 1-2). This adds to our understanding of the effects that myths, such as Thanksgiving, have on people's lives and the way they can be used by politicians to unify people and therefore legitimize political agendas (Weiss 369-71). The great impact myths have on

people's lives also shows why people often feel threatened by the revision of myths and national narratives (Eason et al. 2). Another useful contribution that this study makes is the way the perspectives and experiences of the Indigenous people have been omitted from national narratives and if they are included at all, they are mostly depicted through negative stereotypes to justify the colonial actions against them (Eason et al. 2). Even though this is a psychology study, this largely theoretical part of their study is very useful in understanding the national myth Thanksgiving, because it explains how national narratives work for both the people included and those excluded.

Political and religious historian from the United Kingdom Matthew Rowley (2021) focused in his study on the Thanksgiving myth and the inaccuracies and inconsistencies of the Pilgrims. He agrees with Weiss and Eason et al. on several points about the Thanksgiving myth and its use as a national narrative. He argues that Americans should learn more about Native American history, so they get a more complete image, which hopefully will bridge some of the divide that exists in society today (Rowley 15-7). His study enhances understanding of the Pilgrims and how they understood the term "liberty" differently than how people interpret it today, and it shows that the Pilgrims thought of other people in terms of religion, instead of race, what has often been argued. He argues that the modern theories of race and racial superiority were not yet developed in the 17th century and that the Pilgrims were instead very concerned with the fact that the Indigenous Peoples were not Christians like themselves. Their treatment of the Indigenous Peoples was based on the fact that they were not Christians (Rowley 10). This ties into what Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues when she examines the colonial violence: she mentions that it was not racism that led to the violence, but rather the other way around (Dunbar-Ortiz 59). Rowley attempts to apply modern views of migration to the Pilgrims and, even though I agree with him that the Pilgrims did many things completely wrong, I do not think it is very useful to apply the modern views of migration to the Pilgrims without mentioning the limitations of this comparison between situations that are 400 years apart. Even though Rowley does not fully consider this limitation, his comparisons are thought-provoking and his other arguments, such as those mentioned above, are very useful in understanding the Thanksgiving myth and the Pilgrims.

Just like Rowley, American religious historian John G. Turner (2020) explicitly mentions the way the Pilgrims understood and used the term "liberty" in many contradictory ways (Turner 3). In his book *They Knew They Were Pilgrims* Turner examines the meaning of liberty in New

England, and Plymouth specifically. I used chapters three “Mayflower” and four “Thanksgiving,” because these chapters provided useful background information on the Pilgrims and their journey, and on their early relations with the Wampanoag people since their arrival. The value of Turner’s book is in the way he focuses on the role that religion played in the Pilgrim’s journey, the Mayflower Compact, and the way they treated the Wampanoag. He, like Weiss, Eason et al., and Rowley, points towards the inaccuracies of the Thanksgiving myth and that the event of the First Thanksgiving was irrelevant at that time (Turner 81-3). It is then interesting to think about why it is so relevant today, while it was irrelevant at the time. Even though Turner briefly touches upon the National Day of Mourning in his conclusion, he does not elaborate on this counter-tradition’s emergence. Nevertheless, this book is very useful in understanding the myths of the Mayflower Compact, the Pilgrims, and Thanksgiving and the role religion has played in them.

Historian David Silverman (2019), who is specialized in Native American history, wrote a book about the history of the Wampanoag people before and after the arrival of the Pilgrims, called *This Land is Their Land*. He seeks to challenge the Mayflower and Thanksgiving myth by focusing on the Wampanoag people (Kruer 987). By having worked with Wampanoag historians Darius Coombs and Linda Coombs, Silverman tells the history of the Mayflower, Thanksgiving, and King Philip’s War from the perspective of the Indigenous Peoples in New England. He not only looks at the past, but also looks at the present and future of Thanksgiving and the National Day of Mourning and how the holiday should be celebrated in a more inclusive manner in the future. It is an influential book that has had an influence on scholars, such as Rowley. However, in her book review, Linda Coombs mentions that she is not entirely content with the way in which Silverman has written about the Wampanoag, as she observed that Silverman’s conclusions and opinions were sometimes condescending and biased by his worldview, which is different than most Indigenous Peoples. She also adds that she found it disappointing that he used too many colonial sources and that his observations are sometimes simplified or extenuating (Coombs 158).

The book *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* written by Indigenous historian and activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) provides the history of the United States written from an Indigenous perspective. This book is very valuable, because it sheds a different light on the history of the United States. She aimed to provide the reality of US history, without embracing settler colonialism and genocide, like most of the history books that are used in

schools (Dunbar-Ortiz 2). She defines the history of the US as one that is based on settler colonialism, which she defines as: “the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft.” (Dunbar-Ortiz 2). She provides useful discussions of the founding of the Plymouth Colony, the Mayflower Compact, and Native American activism in the 1960s and 1970s.

A non-academic source that seeks to examine the role that the Netherlands played in the Mayflower and the emergence of the United States and to find out how this story is looked at today and what it has meant for the Indigenous people, is the Dutch documentary series “In het kielzog van de Mayflower” (2021). It is presented by Leo Blokhuis, who is a Dutch pop music journalist, so he is not a specialist in American studies, which makes the academic value of the documentary series doubtful. However, his focus on the history of the Wampanoag people is very insightful and adds new perspectives. Like Silverman, Blokhuis does interview people who are very much involved in the story, such as Wampanoag historians Darius Coombs and Linda Coombs, historians Sarah Churchwell and Richard Pickering, and prominent Wampanoag people like Kisha James (granddaughter of Frank James, who laid the foundations of the National Day of Mourning), Tall Oak, and Brian Weeden. He clearly wants the Wampanoag people to tell their own story instead of himself as an outsider and he interviews those people who also want the broader public to be aware of the perspectives of the Indigenous Peoples. The value of this source is that Blokhuis lets the Wampanoag people tell their version of the Mayflower and Thanksgiving myth and that he attends the National Day of Mourning in 2021 himself to learn from the public speakers.

Another non-academic source that is certainly useful, is the website Mayflower 400 (2020). This website is an informative website that provides information about the history of the Mayflower and the Indigenous Peoples since the arrival of the Pilgrims. It is created by the organization “Mayflower 400 Universities Group,” which is a collaboration of scholars from several universities in the UK and other international partners. The goal of this website is to commemorate the 400-year anniversary of the Mayflower in an inclusive and honest way, exploring the story from multiple angles and perspectives of those impacted by colonization (Mayflower 400). Like Silverman, Turner, and Weiss, it provides some useful background information on the Mayflower, King Philip’s War, and the National Day of Mourning.

Chapter 2: Thanksgiving

Introduction

This chapter will deal with the origins of Thanksgiving which lie in the Pilgrim and Mayflower stories. It will start with the discussion of the Pilgrims and the Mayflower story, which will be followed with an introduction to the Wampanoag people who played a big role in the Pilgrim story and in the First Thanksgiving, and it will end with a discussion of national narratives and the development of Thanksgiving as a national myth and holiday. This chapter will therefore answer the subquestion: What were the origins and development of Thanksgiving as a national holiday and myth?

Origin story: Pilgrims, Mayflower and First Thanksgiving

The origins of the US national holiday Thanksgiving lie in England, where a religious group did not agree with the Anglican church and decided to leave the country. These people are often referred to as the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims disagreed with the Anglican Church, because they believed that Christianity needed to become simpler and that it should not be tied to the state and the King. They did not feel safe in England anymore due to their different views on religion and their critiques on the Anglican Church, as England in this time was intolerant towards dissenters. These separatists decided to move to the more tolerant Netherlands where they would be able to practice their form of Christianity without the fear of being persecuted. They moved to Leiden and created their own little community. Even though the Pilgrims were able to practice their religion, they were not allowed to establish their own church in the Netherlands either (Turner 47-53; KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 1 and 2).

After some years in the Netherlands, the Pilgrims felt that their identity was fading away, since they did not have their own church and their children started speaking Dutch. This made the Pilgrims decide to leave Europe once and for all and head to America, often referred to as the 'New World.' Before they went to America, the Pilgrims and some other settlers made a stop in London to seek investors to finance the venture. These investors, often called 'Adventurers,' made an agreement with the 'Planters,' those who were going to settle in America, that they had a partnership for seven years. The agreement entailed that the Planters would plant a colony and they were to ship commodities back to England. After seven years, the different shareholders

would divide the profits. Besides the Pilgrims, another group of people joined them on their way to America, which are called the ‘Strangers.’ These people wanted to start a new life and make money in the new colony (Turner 47-53; KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 1 and 2).

Contrary to the popular myth, it was not just religious freedom that the Pilgrims and the other settlers sought in America, as they already had that in the Netherlands. Making profits, planting a colony and a fresh start for individuals were also key motivations for settling in America. (Silverman 18-9; Turner 57-61).

After three attempts to sail to America, the Pilgrims and the Strangers left Plymouth, England on the ship the *Mayflower* and headed west on September 6, 1620. Initially, the Pilgrims and Strangers left on both the *Speedwell* and the *Mayflower*, but the *Speedwell* leaked on the first and second attempt, so the *Mayflower* left without the *Speedwell*. This meant that the *Mayflower* was extremely packed, as there were 102 passengers and 30 crew members on the *Mayflower*, according to the passengers list (Turner 47-53; KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 1 and 2).

Right before their arrival on Cape Cod, the Pilgrims and the strangers drew up an agreement which set some basic government rules and said that the Pilgrims had the right to spread Christianity in the name of King James of England. This “Mayflower Compact” was a short document that laid out the most basic groundwork for self-government. It was not, as the Mayflower myth suggests, the first constitution or bill of rights, like that of the United States today. It was just a partly religious, partly political agreement that said that their own government would be annually elected. The word “democracy” was still considered dangerous during these times and it was still developing as a concept, so the Mayflower Compact did not mention democracy. Yet, the Mayflower Compact was a highly influential document that is considered to be the beginning of American democracy (Silverman 18-9; Turner 57-61; Dunbar-Ortiz 49).

The Wampanoag

The Indigenous Peoples that are inextricably linked with the Thanksgiving story are the Wampanoag people. The name “Wampanoag” means People of the First Light (Eldredge). Contrary to what the name suggests, it is not a homogeneous group that lives in one place, but it is rather a confederation in southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Turner 62). The different communities and where they live are described by scholar John G. Turner: “Paomet and Nauset on the eastern cape, Manomet and Patuxet along the western shore of Cape Cod Bay.

Farther to the west, in present-day Bristol, Rhode Island, the Pokanokets” (Turner 62). The Wampanoag also lived on the islands of Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket (Eldredge). Before the Pilgrims arrived, the Wampanoag encompassed at least 67 tribal communities, which is only 6 today (Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah)). Today, there are two federally recognized Wampanoag tribes: the Mashpee-Wampanoag Tribe and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) (Silverman 12).

An important person of the Wampanoag who played an important role in the Thanksgiving story is Ousamequin. The Pilgrims called Ousamequin, the Wampanoag sachem (chief) by his title: Massasoit. The Wampanoag culture was very different from the English culture and the Pilgrims misunderstood many aspects of their culture (Rowley 6). They called, for instance, Massasoit the king of the Wampanoag, even though the Massasoit was the paramount sachem over all Wampanoag sachems and not a king. The Pilgrims assumed that the Wampanoag had a monarchy like they had themselves, but their cultures were fundamentally different (Turner 62, Silverman 207).

Early contact

Before the Pilgrims went ashore in Cape Cod in 1620, the Indigenous Peoples had already been in contact with several Europeans who came to America temporarily. Early English explorers came for the fish, which Cape Cod was named after. From 1605 onwards, however, English explorers did not come for just the fish; they also came to abduct people. Indigenous men were forcefully taken and used as translators, navigators, and as the subjects of exhibitions in London. One of the English explorers, Thomas Hunt, abducted about twenty members of the Patuxet Wampanoag, among whom was the well-known Squanto (Turner 63-6). Hunt took the captivated people to Málaga, Spain to sell them as slaves. Squanto, however, ended up in England and it remains unclear how he did so. While in England, Squanto became quite proficient in English, which eventually ensured his return to Wampanoag country with Captain Thomas Dermer. For the English, this deal was useful, because they could use Squanto to restore relationships with the Wampanoag, which was damaged due to the many abductions. However, when Squanto returned home, everyone was gone. Most Wampanoag people died due to the diseases that the Europeans brought, to which the Indigenous people were not immune. Those who did survive the diseases had fled Squanto’s native Patuxet. (Silverman 87-93; Turner 66-7; Dunbar-Ortiz 62-3). The

Wampanoag and other Indigenous Peoples were already used to English people coming and usually bringing violence and disease before the Pilgrims came. This context in which the Pilgrims would later arrive was thus not optimal if they wanted to establish friendly relationships with the Indigenous Peoples.

When the Pilgrims arrived in 1620, the Wampanoag thought that the Pilgrims were yet another group of English people who came to abduct some of their people, so they were very hesitant to make contact with the Pilgrims. The heavy journey to America had weakened and starved the Pilgrims, so they needed to plant crops and build houses in order to survive. The Pilgrims had come in the fall and needed food to be able to get through the winter, so they started looting food, such as corn, that the Wampanoag saved for themselves for the spring. They took the food, because there was nobody there to give it to them. Instead, the Pilgrims thought this abundance of food was God-given and gladly took it (KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 3; Turner 68-9).

It was not until March that the Pilgrims and the Indigenous people made direct contacts. An English-speaking Abenaki who lived among the Wampanoag walked into the Pilgrims' settlement. His name was Samoset (as the Pilgrims understood his name) and he introduced the Pilgrims to some Wampanoag, including Massasoit and Squanto (Turner 75-7). Not much later Massasoit and Governor Carver, on behalf of the Pilgrims, formed an alliance, recorded by the Pilgrims. The treaty said that no Wampanoag should ever attack the Pilgrims and if they did the Pilgrims were allowed to punish them. It also said that both the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims should return their stolen goods and that both parties should aid one another when one is at war with any other group. This treaty was unequal, because the English never had to promise that they would allow the Wampanoag to punish any Pilgrim if they attacked the Wampanoag. However, it should be kept in mind that both groups could have interpreted the treaty differently and that both groups had different motivations for forming such an alliance. What the Wampanoag hoped to acquire from the treaty were a trading partner and an ally, as this would help their position with regard to their opponents, the Narragansetts. The Pilgrims needed security, food, and aid in order to survive, but they also needed the investors back in England to understand the relationship they had with the Wampanoag, so they could send money and more people. The Wampanoag, however, understood the political terms, like 'ally,' differently, as these

terms are ambiguous and how one understands it depends on one's culture (Silverman 204-6; Turner 77-8; Dunbar-Ortiz 62-4).

First Thanksgiving

To help their new allies, the Wampanoag taught the Pilgrims many ways to grow crops and where to fish. Squanto demonstrated how to grow crops of corn, wheat, barley, and peas the way the Wampanoag had done it. This resulted in a great few months during which the Pilgrims did not have to worry about getting enough food. The Pilgrims wanted to celebrate the fall harvest amongst themselves and went out to gather some more food. As they were hunting, ninety Wampanoag followed the sound of the guns, brought some deer, and joined the Pilgrims' harvest celebration. The celebration was nowhere near the formal meal that many paintings from the nineteenth century depicted, nor was it a thanksgiving as the Pilgrims understood it. A thanksgiving for the Pilgrims usually consisted of prayer, worship, and fasting. It was rather a harvest festival and a diplomatic event to strengthen the fledgling alliance between Massasoit and Governor Carver. This event is what in the modern myth of Thanksgiving is referred to as the First Thanksgiving. (Means and Wolf 409; Turner 78; Silverman 225-30).

An important part of the Thanksgiving myth is the idea of peaceful relations between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag for the years after the First Thanksgiving (Silverman 336). However, from around 1660 onwards, the colonial threats were beginning to be more pressing than any intertribal conflict, as the Pilgrims were conquering more and more land. The fifteen years before King Philip's War in 1675 were not as peaceful as the myth has it, as Massasoit's sons Wamsutta and Pumetacom took over his leadership of the Wampanoag. The brothers were different leaders than their father, because they were ready to fight back against the Pilgrims and colonialism (Silverman 336). When the Pilgrims demanded a peace agreement between them and the Wampanoag, which meant that the Wampanoag should hand over their guns and kill three of their members for their murder on one of the Pilgrims, Pumetacom refused. He, instead, called on the Wampanoag, Nipmucks, Pocumtuck, and Narragansetts to start a war in resistance to the colonialist army that became known as King Philip's War, named after Pumetacom's English name 'Philip' (Mayflower 400, "The"; Dunbar-Ortiz 64). This is considered by many to be the deadliest war in the history of the United States, as thousands of people died (Mayflower 400, "The").

National narratives

Thanksgiving is a national narrative, which makes use of civil religion, and therefore has a lot of power to shape people's perception of, and feeling about, their country. National narratives and civil religion are two concepts that are closely related. Civil religion places a nation's history and present in a religious framework. It sees the people of the United States as the 'chosen people' with a divine mission. Civil religion has the power to legitimize political agendas and construct and uphold a national identity, which can reconstruct a nation's history. A way to do this is through myths such as the Thanksgiving myth. Holidays such as Thanksgiving can both reflect and shape a nation's collective memory (Weiss 369-70). As a part of civil religion, national narratives have the ability to create a national identity, as they can generate a sense of pride and patriotism, unify people around a common identity or political goal, and offer hope for the future (Eason et al. 2-3). The Thanksgiving myth as a national narrative is thus powerful enough to create a sense of pride, unify people, and offer hope for the future. This ability of national narratives to create a national identity plays into Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community. He argues that the nation is an image of their community in the minds of those living in it. Nations are not false, but rather they are imagined and invented (Anderson 6-7).

An inseparable part of national narratives is the practice of inclusion and exclusion (Eason et al. 3; Anderson 3). By including certain identities in the national identity, there are inevitably identities excluded from it, because there is no need for a nation if everyone has the same identity (Anderson 3). What he means by this is that a nation or national identity is not necessary if everyone has the same identity, as a nation is meant to include some and exclude others. A nation is never meant to encompass the whole of mankind (Anderson 7). Indigenous Peoples are often either absent from most of the American national narratives, or they are considered to be vanishing (Deloria 8). This is true for the Thanksgiving myth, because it deliberately excludes the perspectives of the Wampanoag, while they turned out to have played a substantial role in the development of Thanksgiving.

Development as a national holiday and myth

The holiday of Thanksgiving has not always been about the story of the First Thanksgiving. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that Thanksgiving became a national holiday. Before this, it was a regional holiday only celebrated in New England and states to

which New Englanders had moved. The early and regional Thanksgiving celebrations were completely different from those after the second half of the nineteenth century, because these were held in the tradition of the Puritans who would fast and pray. They were mostly about being pious and not about being celebratory and eating as much as during the modern holiday. Around the time of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863. The idea behind this was that this national holiday would bring unity among the divided United States of the Civil War, as national narratives can unify people and arouse feelings of patriotism. The marking of Thanksgiving as a national holiday was also when the holiday became associated with the story of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag (Silverman 15-6; Weiss 371-6; Rowley 11; Mekouar; Turner 2&83). It was eventually Reverend Alexander Young's influential footnote to the only primary document of the First Thanksgiving that widely spread the myth of Thanksgiving in 1841 when he published it. This primary document was a letter by Edward Winslow, a member of the Pilgrims, in which he described the harvest celebration of 1621. Young's footnote, for the first time ever, called the harvest celebration of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag 'the First Thanksgiving,' even though Winslow himself did not call the occasion the First Thanksgiving. This myth is subsequently the story that children learn at school and so it is massively spread throughout the United States and part of the collective memory (Silverman 15-6; Weiss 371-6).

Throughout history, Thanksgiving has been used to bolster the nation's unity, even before Abraham Lincoln declared it a national holiday. Right after the Revolutionary War in the late eighteenth century President George Washington issued a proclamation that called for a national day of thanksgiving and prayer for the 13 states (Mekouar). The days of thanksgiving were most likely supposed to create a national identity and unity among the fledgling United States of America. Mekouar adds that after George Washington, James Madison, and John Adams the first president to issue a Thanksgiving proclamation was Abraham Lincoln and every president after him so far. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression changed the date of Thanksgiving from the last Thursday in November to the third Thursday in November. This decision was mostly economic, to booster the economy in times of an economic crisis (Mekouar).

Summary

It is clear that the Wampanoag had helped the Pilgrims survive the first year after their arrival in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. It is likely that the Pilgrims would not have survived if the Wampanoag had not provided them with food and knowledge about the land. Yet, the Wampanoag are hardly ever mentioned in the famous Thanksgiving myth. They supposedly handed over their lands to the Pilgrims peacefully and disappeared, while in fact their land was stolen, their people were murdered, and they continued to persist. The myth of Thanksgiving has been used as a national narrative to stimulate unity and create a national identity by President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. National narratives are great for creating a sense of patriotism, unifying people, and offering hope for the future. The next chapter will explore the way the National Day of Mourning, the counter-tradition of Thanksgiving, came into existence as a response to this misrepresentation in the national narrative of Thanksgiving.

Chapter 3 The National Day of Mourning

Introduction

This chapter will examine the way in which the National Day of Mourning is a reaction to Thanksgiving and what caused it to emerge. In order to better understand the counter-tradition, this chapter will also contextualize it by examining how it is related to other forms of Native American activism, such as the Alcatraz occupation by the Indians of All Tribes and the activism by the American Indian Movement. In addition, the chapter will look at how the National Day of Mourning is held today and what it stands for. This chapter will answer the subquestion: Why and how did the National Day of Mourning emerge as a counter-tradition in response to Thanksgiving?

Origins of the National Day of Mourning

The National Day of Mourning is a counter-tradition of Thanksgiving, because the myth of Thanksgiving does not represent the experiences of the Indigenous Peoples (Eason et al. 3). As Wampanoag member, and granddaughter of Frank James, said in the speech she held during the National Day of Mourning in 2021:

The next part of the mythology is true: some Wampanoag ancestors did welcome the Pilgrims and saved them from starvation. And what did we get in return for this kindness? Genocide, the theft of our lands, slavery, starvation, and never-ending oppression. When people perpetuate the myth of Thanksgiving, they are not only erasing our genocide, but also celebrating it (Kisha James in KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 5: 20:00-24:00).

Kisha James' speech refers to the Pilgrims' ingratitude towards the Wampanoag, who did save them from starvation, and instead the Pilgrims stole their lands, attempted to erase them and their culture, and they oppressed them. As Dunbar-Ortiz also mentions: some individual Indigenous Peoples are often credited with their contributions to the "making of the United States" during occasions such as Thanksgiving, but this is often used to cover up the fact that the United States was built on the oppression of the Indigenous Peoples and the looting of their land and resources (Dunbar-Ortiz 5). It is ironic, then, that the holiday celebrating the arrival of the Pilgrims is called

‘Thanksgiving,’ while in fact the Pilgrims were everything but thankful towards the ones who helped them survive. To the Wampanoag, Thanksgiving is a painful reminder of all the wrongs that have been done to them and their ancestors as a result of colonialism. The National Day of Mourning instead commemorates Native American ancestors and increases awareness of Native American struggles today (Silverman 560). Besides the fact that Thanksgiving celebrates the genocide of the Indigenous Peoples, it also reminds the Wampanoag that they do not have much to be thankful for. Brian Weeden, the Mashpee Wampanoag leader, says that pollution, global warming, economic problems, and culture loss due to the boarding schools are all reasons why the Wampanoag have little to be thankful for these days (KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 4). To call attention to this, the National Day of Mourning is the antithesis of Thanksgiving and it calls for inclusion in the national identity (Weiss 368).

A contributor to the emergence of the National Day of Mourning is Pequot activist William Apess. Already in 1836, he wrote his famous “Eulogy on King Philip’s War” in which he deemed the Pilgrims’ arrival in America and the Fourth of July to be “days of mourning and not joy” (Apess), because of all the wrongs the settlers have done to the Indigenous Peoples (Silverman 25-6). It was, however, not until 1970 that this counter-narrative got more attention and started to get a place in the national identity (Weiss 380). Apess’ words have inspired activists of more than hundred years later when they named the day on which Thanksgiving was celebrated the “National Day of Mourning.”

The National Day of Mourning was first held in 1970. Member of the Wampanoag community of Gay Head (Aquinnah) Frank James was invited by the Massachusetts Department of Commerce to hold a Thanksgiving speech for the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrims’ arrival. James’ speech needed to be approved in advance, but his critical and revisionist speech did not live up to the organizers’ expectations of a heroic and glorious retelling of the Pilgrim myth (Silverman 12; Weiss 374). The organizers disapproved of Frank James’ speech called “Our Spirit Refuses to Die” as it was deemed “inflammatory” (Silverman 26; K. James). He was given the opportunity to hold their revised speech, but he refused, as he did not accept this censorship, so he was uninvited from the occasion (Mayflower 400 “Frank”; Hill). Instead, Frank James held his speech in front of the statue of Massasoit in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Frank James’ activist organization, the United American Indians of New England (UAIN), invited the representatives of the Wampanoag, the Narragansetts, and the American Indian

Movement (AIM) to come to the statue and listen to his speech (Silverman 25; Weiss 374; Mosley and Hagan).

The speech Frank James intended to hold during the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims expressed what the coming of the Pilgrims has meant to the Wampanoag and how helping the Pilgrims might have been their biggest mistake. He also called attention to the fact that the American Indians have not faded into the background or vanished, but that despite the fact that they have adapted to the white man's culture, their unique culture continues to exist and that is what makes them proud. This all is summarized in his final sentence: "We are determined, and our presence here this evening is living testimony that this is only the beginning of the American Indian, particularly the Wampanoag, to regain the position in this country that is rightfully ours." (James). Since then, this event was called the National Day of Mourning, referring to William Apess' words.

The National Day of Mourning has several functions, besides spreading the true history of Thanksgiving (Means and Wolf 411). It was intended as the American Indian counterpart of the Pilgrim Progress march around Plymouth, celebrated by the ancestors of the Pilgrims dressed up in colonial costumes (Silverman 25; KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 5). It is also a day of remembrance on which the Indigenous Peoples mourn and honor their ancestors. Moreover, it is a day of protest against the racism and injustices that are still directed towards Indigenous Peoples from all over the world ("United American Indians of New England – UAINE;" K. James).

The Red Power Movement 1960s-1970s

It is not a coincidence that Frank James organized the first National Day of Mourning and intended to challenge the national narrative of Thanksgiving in 1970. It took place in the midst of the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s; a time in which Indigenous Peoples, through activism, pushed for tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and inclusion in the national identity (Weiss 373; Dunbar-Ortiz 183-4). During the times of the civil rights movement, the Red Power movement and the protest on Thanksgiving began with the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, as has often been argued (Weiss 373-4; Strange and Loo 68-9; K. James). Even though the nineteen-month-long occupation was not the first time the island of Alcatraz was used for Native American protest, it was certainly the most significant, as it inspired a larger movement of Native

American activism. Protesters from “Indians of All Tribes” arrived at Alcatraz and refused to leave, making demands for self-determination, housing, and being able to run schools and health clinics. They claimed the island, made it their home, and painted political messages all over the island (Strange and Loo 56-7; Dunbar-Ortiz 183-4). The occupation drew massive media attention, which was due to their choice of occupying Alcatraz Island. This choice was both symbolic and strategic, as Alcatraz used to be a notorious prison and it would subsequently attract much media attention; both nationally and internationally. This, in turn, would help the Indians of All Tribes convince the public that they are the rightful owners of all federal lands. Adding to the dramatization of their case, the protesters referred to the poor conditions on and the identity of Alcatraz as being comparable to the Native American reservations, and therefore making it a suitable place for them to own (Strange and Loo 59-60; Dunbar-Ortiz 183-4). Although Native Americans did not successfully reclaim ownership of Alcatraz, the occupation of Alcatraz was a historically significant event that inspired Native American activists (Strange and Loo 57).

Protests against Thanksgiving

The occupation of Alcatraz was also the start of the protests against Thanksgiving. On Thanksgiving Day in 1969, during the occupation, a great number of Native Americans came together on Alcatraz to collectively commemorate the day as “Un-Thanksgiving Day.” This day was all about raising awareness of Native American cultures and breaking stereotypes. Hundreds of Native Americans from fifteen tribes performed a Pow-Wow, which is a traditional gathering where people would sing, dance, and socialize (Weiss 374). Un-Thanksgiving Day, however, was not held annually until 1975, as opposed to the National Day of Mourning, which has been held annually since its emergence in 1970 (Strange and Loo 71). Another fundamental difference between Un-Thanksgiving Day and the National Day of Mourning is that Un-Thanksgiving Day has not so much to do with a protest on the Thanksgiving myth, but rather with keeping the memory of Alcatraz and the occupation alive. The National Day of Mourning is, unlike Un-Thanksgiving Day, explicitly a counter-tradition to the Thanksgiving myth and holiday (Strange and Loo 69-70; Weiss 373-4).

The occupation of Alcatraz by the Indians of All Tribes has inspired other Native Americans to be active in protesting. The well-known American Indian Movement (AIM)

emerged already in 1968, but after the Alcatraz occupation their focus shifted towards a more national and radical organization (Strange and Loo 68). AIM's tactics were focused on creating a sense of a pan-Indian identity and attracting media attention and this was very cleverly done by AIM's charismatic figure: Russell Means. AIM chose to protest on symbolic places, like the Alcatraz occupation, by choosing places such as Mount Rushmore and Wounded Knee (Weiss 376). AIM's policy was to stand with any Indian person, nation, or community, whenever they were invited (Means and Wolf 408). After AIM was invited by the UAIINE, Russell Means also visited Plymouth when Frank James and his organization UAIINE organized the first National Day of Mourning in 1970. Russell Means, however, was far more radical than Frank James, who only wanted to peacefully mourn and educate the audience about the truth of Thanksgiving (Silverman 29; Weiss 375). Russell Means did not just want to talk, but rather he wanted action by saying: "Today you will see the Indian reclaim the *Mayflower* in a symbolic gesture to reclaim our rights in this country." (Means qtd. in Silverman 29). Not long after Means' words, a group of AIM protesters seized the recreation of the *Mayflower*, which was built for the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in Plymouth, and tore down the English flag (Means and Wolf 411-5; Weiss 375; Silverman 29; Strange and Loo 68; Stripes 89-90; K. James; Johnson "National"). After they were removed from the *Mayflower* by the police, the protesters went on to chaotically disturb a Thanksgiving dinner at the Plimoth Plantation Museum (Means and Wolf 411-5; Silverman 29-30). The occupation of the *Mayflower* was another case of AIM's tactics to protest at symbolic places, that would attract much media attention and create a pan-Indian identity (Stripes 90). Frank James was not pleased with this radical and militant action by AIM and complained that the Wampanoag now had to deal with what the "national Indians" had caused, as they went too far in his eyes (Silverman 30). The National Day of Mourning was on the one hand part of the strategy of the American Indian Movement, but on the other hand it was a unique event that did not match AIM's goals and tactics. The National Day of Mourning was specific to the Wampanoag and at the same time a broader pan-Indian movement that called for inclusion and protest against colonialism.

The National Day of Mourning today

Since 1970, the National Day of Mourning has been held on Cole's Hill in Plymouth, Massachusetts every year on Thanksgiving Day (Mayflower 400 "Frank;" K. James). Each year

the National Day of Mourning draws media attention and Indigenous Peoples not only from across the United States, but even from both North and South America, which gives the National Day of Mourning a Pan-Indian nature (Silverman 20; Mosley and Hagan). The event is now led by Frank James' son Moonanum James and his granddaughter Kisha James is also a prominent speaker and representative. Frank James' organization the UAINE continues to organize the National Day of Mourning and works to educate people on the racism that Native Americans continue to experience and to educate them on the consequences of colonialism (Mayflower 400 "Frank"; Silverman 559).

Kisha James held a speech during the National Day of Mourning in 2021 in which she explained what is wrong with the Thanksgiving myth and stressed the Native American's resilience and their inherent right to the land. At the end of her speech, she literally quoted the final words her grandfather's repressed speech "Our Spirits Refused to Die" and she added a powerful final sentence:

We are determined and our presence here is living testimony that this is only the beginning of the American Indian, particularly the Wampanoag, to regain the position in this country that is rightfully ours. We are not vanishing, we are not conquered, we are as strong as ever. (Kisha James in KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 5: 20:00-24:00)

Kisha James' speech powerfully sums up the sentiments of the contemporary National Day of Mourning, as it is both a protest on the celebration of the myth of Thanksgiving, and an event to spread awareness of the consequences of colonialism and the ongoing presence of Indigenous Peoples.

Kisha James argues that it is important for non-Native people to learn about the real history of Thanksgiving, rather than celebrating Thanksgiving with the typical Pilgrim myth in mind. She does not want to abandon the holiday altogether, as many Native Americans have been accused of, but she rather wants people to celebrate it with the reality of the Thanksgiving myth in their minds. However, not all people are willing to accept this revisionist version of history and continue to celebrate the Thanksgiving myth (Mosley and Hagan). Member of the Mashpee Wampanoag, Ramona Peters, agrees with Kisha James that Thanksgiving should not be eliminated, but it should rather be revised so that it does not misrepresent the Wampanoag and it

does not celebrate the wrongs of colonialism. Instead, she argues, the element of gratitude should be central to the holiday. Ideally, Mashpee Wampanoag Paula Peters says, Thanksgiving will be an inclusive holiday and the National Day of Mourning will not be necessary anymore (Silverman 557-8).

Summary

The National Day of Mourning emerged as a counter-tradition to the Thanksgiving holiday and originated from an attempt to censure Frank James' Thanksgiving speech. Instead, Frank James held his speech in front of many other Indigenous Peoples from other tribes and called it the National Day of Mourning. Russell Means and other activists from AIM also attended and called for action, instead of words, which was a fundamentally different strategy than what Frank James had in mind. The National Day of Mourning is still held on Thanksgiving Day each year where Indigenous speakers from around the hemisphere come together to mourn, protest, and educate the non-Native public.

Conclusion

The celebration of the holiday and myth of Thanksgiving has proven to be deeply offensive to the Wampanoag specifically, and Native Americans in general, because the myth is highly inaccurate. In the myth, the experiences of the Wampanoag have deliberately been erased and the wrongs inflicted upon them are celebrated. The counter-tradition of Thanksgiving, the National Day of Mourning, is a reaction to the misrepresentation of the Wampanoag in the national myth and the ingratitude that the Pilgrims and the contemporary American society have shown them (Eason et al. 3; Weiss 368). The first National Day of Mourning was held during the influential occupation of Alcatraz and during the rise of the American Indian Movement. AIM's leader Russell Means attended the first National Day of Mourning and used the occasion as a protest for AIM, which was not the intention Frank James had when he invited AIM and other representatives of Native American people (Weiss 375; Silverman 29; Strange and Loo 68; Stripes 89-90; Johnson "National"). Nevertheless, the National Day of Mourning has been held annually since 1970 and it is still of great significance, as members of Indigenous groups from over the Western Hemisphere attend, as well as an increasing number of non-Native people (Silverman 20; KRO-NCRV and Blokhuis episode 5; Mosley and Hagan). It continues to stand for a day of activism to raise awareness of racism towards Native Americans; a day of mourning and honoring ancestors; and as an antithesis to the Thanksgiving celebrations that are held in Plymouth, Massachusetts (Silverman 25; KRO-NCRV episode 5; "United American Indians of New England - UAINÉ").

Historical revisionism has helped to look beyond the standard telling of the Thanksgiving myth and critically revise it with the addition of the experiences of the Wampanoag and the reinterpretation of the historical wrongs. In this way, the Thanksgiving myth was challenged and it became clear that the Wampanoag have been misrepresented and their experiences have been absent. Through historical revisionism, I aimed to provide a more inclusive history of Thanksgiving and create a better understanding of the National Day of Mourning.

Since there are not many scholarly articles about the National Day of Mourning as another form of Native American activism during the Red Power movement, it is necessary to include Native American voices to get a more complete image of the counter-tradition of Thanksgiving. I have done this as much as possible by using sources written by Indigenous Peoples and sources

that have interviewed Wampanoag scholars and other members. Still, too little research is done on the National Day of Mourning in relation to other forms of Native American activism, so it would be interesting for future scholars to elaborate on this. It is essential that Native American experiences are included in the American national identity, through national narratives and myths. Their experiences have been largely omitted and/or misrepresented in myths like Thanksgiving, but in order to create a future in which everyone feels included, it is necessary to not celebrate Native American's loss of land, cultural genocide, and oppression. Instead, there should be a more inclusive and accurate holiday, which celebrates gratitude. By studying how the Wampanoag feel about Thanksgiving and what they think should be the future of the holiday, scholars can contribute to this more inclusive holiday in the future.

It is good to think about the future of holidays like Thanksgiving and Columbus Day. Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples' Day are now celebrated simultaneously, recognizing both the myth of Columbus and the experiences of the Indigenous Peoples. One can wonder, however, how fruitful it is to celebrate two holidays on one day and whether this creates a dichotomy instead of unity and inclusivity. Wampanoag members Kisha James and Ramona Peters said that they do not wish to get rid of Thanksgiving altogether, nor do they only want to have the National Day of Mourning. They just want to keep celebrating Thanksgiving, but not with the exclusive myth that only represents the Pilgrims and reduces the Wampanoag to minor characters and stereotypes. They do not want Thanksgiving to be exclusively about Native Americans either. Once the Wampanoag are accurately acknowledged and represented in the Thanksgiving myth, the National Day of Mourning will not be necessary anymore (Silverman 557-8). But until this happens, the Wampanoag and other Indigenous Peoples will continue to hold the National Day of Mourning. National narratives that exclude Indigenous voices, such as Thanksgiving, should be critically revised, so that they accurately represent both Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Peoples, and that the Indigenous Peoples are no longer excluded.

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