

2010

# Wampum: The Transfer and Creation of Rituals on the Early American Frontier

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## Recommended Citation

Published in *Transfer and Spaces*, ed. Gita Dharampal-Frick, Robert Langer, and Niles Holger Petersen, vol. 5, pp. 171-188. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Books, 2010 <http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de/>

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Paul Otto

## *Wampum*: The Transfer and Creation of Rituals on the Early American Frontier<sup>1</sup>

When Henry Hudson and his crew first entered the region that would become New York, they encountered native people who offered them “stropes of beads”. These belts of beads were likely *wampum*-belts of white shell beads fashioned from the shellfish of Long Island Sound and traded, as well as used among the Indians of north-eastern North America. As the Dutch, English, and French would learn in the coming years, *wampum* meant far more to native people than simply decorative apparel or “baubles” and “trinkets”. *Wampum* manufacture, use, and exchange played a profound role in native society. Giving some indication of its importance to native people, Plymouth colony governor William Bradford wrote in the 1640s “wampum makes the Indians of these parts rich and powerful and also proud thereby.”<sup>2</sup>

Holding to a cultural value that emphasised social exchange, including building and maintaining reciprocal relationships, Native Americans used *wampum* and other products in a wide range of rituals, from simple exchanges of friendship to complex negotiations of intertribal diplomacy with a goal of social cohesion. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European traders, settlers, Indian agents, and colonial officials all learned the importance of *wampum* and utilised it in their interactions with Native Americans. During this time, *wampum* and prac-

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1 Support for research on this project came from the Earhart Foundation. Appreciation is also expressed to several individuals who read and commented on various drafts of this essay, including Lynn Otto, Mark David Hall and Marshall Joseph Becker. As commentator to the conference version of this paper, Manfred Berg offered penetrating insights that constructively pushed forward the analysis of this essay. Comments from conference participants were also helpful. In my research on *wampum*, generally I have benefitted from correspondence with George Hamell. Finally, I thank members of the Pacific Northwest Early Americanists’ Workshop (hosted by Richard Johnson) for their reading and comments on this essay.

2 Bradford 1942: 204. Many anthropologists and historians have written on different aspects of *wampum* and its use by Europeans and Native Americans; several of these are listed below. My interest in *wampum* stems from my research on Dutch-Indian relations in New Netherland; see Otto 2006.

tices involving *wampum* evolved in response to the unique intercultural, colonial context.<sup>3</sup>

This was true especially for *wampum*'s role in European-Native American diplomacy. Native people, in response to the enormous pressures of European colonisation, and Europeans, with the goal of acquiring trade monopolies and advancing various colonial and imperial agendas, each came to understand and adapt to one another's diplomatic rituals. As a result, a unique frontier diplomacy incorporating aspects of the practices of both groups developed. These rituals originated with native people, but eventually became common practice in meetings between Europeans and Indians, and also included elements of European diplomatic practice. *Wampum* stood at the centre of this frontier diplomacy. As Europeans and Native Americans developed cooperative diplomatic protocols on the frontier, *wampum* evolved from strings of shell beads used for diverse exchanges and cultural purposes to belts inscribed with pictographs used primarily for treaty negotiations between Europeans and Native Americans at the frontier.<sup>4</sup>

While this evolution ostensibly represented a two-way cultural exchange, it is not clear that both sides embraced equally the cultural shift indicated by this ritual transfer. Europeans likely made pragmatic decisions in choosing to participate in *wampum* rituals. Moreover, while native people apparently remained motivated by their own cultural values, it should not be assumed that they too might not have been pragmatically motivated. Although *wampum* had pre-contact antecedents, it very much became a product of European-Native American contact. While these origins are not entirely clear, the evidence seems to suggest that Indian adoption of short tubular beads of uniform size, made of whelk and later quahog clams, came after the advent of European traders and the availability of tools that facilitated the manufacture of these refined shell beads.

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3 The term *wampum* is used loosely here. For centuries, native people employed a variety of shell products in the ways described here. Out of these shell products there emerged tubular beads that came to be called *wampum* by Europeans. As will be explained elsewhere in the essay, *wampum* underwent ongoing evolution resulting from and paralleling contact with Europeans.

4 This evolution of *wampum* did not exclude its use for other purposes. For one, the nature of *wampum* use varied from group to group among those who used it. For another, it appears *wampum* continued to serve some of the traditional purposes it always had among native people. Furthermore, *wampum* evolved in other ways. It became a key component in the fur trade in New England, New Netherland, and New York. As the fur trade moved west, *wampum* continued to be employed in this way, even among native people who did not traditionally use it. In addition, in cash-poor New England and New Netherland, *wampum* was quickly adopted as a form of currency by settlers and colonial officials. Finally, *wampum* belts evolved not just in the political and diplomatic realm, but also in the ecclesiastical among European missions to the Indians. Becker 2002; Hamell 1996.

This essay outlines the development of this frontier diplomacy and *wampum*'s role in it, placing it in the broader context of *wampum*'s evolution in all its dimensions. It then analyses the ritual exchange in the light of Robert Langer's "Transfer of Ritual" argument.<sup>5</sup> While the case of frontier diplomacy in North America supports some of the aspects of the transfer of ritual model outlined by Langer and his co-authors, in other cases it may also reflect something unique to the American context.

At the time of contact between Europeans and Native Americans in north-eastern North America, many Indian groups employed *wampum* in a variety of social, economic, religious, and political rituals. Operating with a cultural value that placed high priority upon social cohesion and reciprocity, native people undertook few transactions without employing ritual giving and exchanges of material goods, and these often included *wampum*. Exchanging *wampum* and other gifts was a means of maintaining social balance between individuals and groups. While the particular use of these shell beads and the specific rituals may have varied from group to group, the centrality of social reciprocity remained constant.<sup>6</sup> For example, native people practised condolence rituals in which *wampum* was given to "wash away the tears" of the bereaved. One such offer was made in the months leading up to the First Dutch-Munsee War in New Netherland, when a European resident was killed by a disgruntled Indian man and local native leaders offered the Dutch governor "two hundred fathom" of *wampum* "to the widow if thereby they would be at peace".<sup>7</sup>

Native American groups also initiated and sealed diplomatic agreements by the giving and receiving of *wampum*. An early example of this was observed by Dutchman Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert, who was the first European to journey to the Oneida country in 1634–1635. While he lodged with them, the Oneidas received "a belt of [*wampum*] and some other strung [*wampum*] [...] from the French Indians as a token of peace that the French Indians were free to come among them". The whole assembly sang joyously and acknowledged the prospect of peace this foreboded. They shouted their agreement, "then hung up another belt", deliberated for a long time, and eventually "concluded the peace for four years."<sup>8</sup> In addition to diplomatic exchanges, diverse social exchanges such as marriage rites, condolence ceremonies, and burials, among others, all featured *wampum* by one group or another. The accompanying image [Image 1] displays an Iroquoian burial. Laid

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5 Langer et al. 2006: 1–10.

6 Neal Salisbury offers a few helpful introductions to the idea of social reciprocity in Salisbury 1982: 118.

7 Quoted in Otto 2006: 118.

8 Gehring & Starna 1988: 14–15.

out next to the deceased (placed in a foetal position before burial) is an array of goods including a belt of *wampum* to accompany him in the afterlife.<sup>9</sup>

Probably the best-known Indian ritual featuring *wampum* developed among the Iroquois to create and maintain their “League of the Longhouse”. Growing out of the condolence and other rituals already noted, the rituals creating and maintaining the Iroquois “League of the Longhouse” aimed at reconciling differences. Annually, *sachems* from each of the five component groups – the Mohawks, Onondagas, Senecas, Oneidas, and Cayugas – fifty in all, would gather for a Grand Council. One European account described the council: “There all the Deputies from the different Nations are present, to make their complaints and receive the necessary satisfaction in mutual gifts – by means of which they maintain a good understanding with one another.”<sup>10</sup> Of prominence among these gifts was *wampum*.

The origins of *wampum* are not entirely clear to scholars today, but by the time of regular contact with Europeans, *wampum* consisted of strings and small belts of white beads made from whelk shells (*Busycon canaliculatum* and *Busycon carica*) found in abundance in Long Island Sound. Before this time, a variety of marine and inland shell products and beads, as well as quillwork, were valued among the native people throughout the region. With the advent of European trade and colonisation that made available awls and other tools facilitating the manufacture of shell beads, *wampum* became more refined and standardised in shape and size. So-called “true *wampum*”, these standardised beads were cylindrical, had a smooth surface, and averaged 5.5 mm in length and 4 mm in diameter by the mid-seventeenth century. Furthermore, with the aid of European tools, native people began making dark beads from the purple portions of the quahog clam (*Mercenaria mercenaria*), which has a much harder shell than the whelk. Although popular conceptions of *wampum* involve substantial belts of white and dark beads with pictographs, such belts did not develop until after the contact with Europeans.<sup>11</sup> In fact, rather than understanding *wampum* as a unique native product which was later adopted by Europeans, a more accurate picture is one in which *wampum*, as it was known in

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9 Lafitau 1977: plate 20.

10 Le Mercier, François 1668, quoted in Richter 1992: 39. *Wampum* was heavily used by all Iroquoian speakers in the northeast – the Huron Confederacy as well as the Iroquois Longhouse; it was also used to a lesser extent by their native neighbours.

11 There are very many anthropological sources on *wampum*’s origin, manufacture, nature, and use. One of the older standards is Beauchamp 1901: 319–480. Representative work of recent decades includes Hamell 1996; Becker 1980: 1–11 (and many other articles as well); and Ceci 1990: 48–63. A fine survey of *wampum* is the published graduate thesis by Lainey 2004. The study of *wampum*, however, deserves much more attention. While recent considerations acknowledge the evolution of *wampum* in the contact period, lack of sustained focus on its development has obscured or overlooked some of that development. My own research on the topic is in the preliminary stages – I am still processing secondary materials while beginning to delve into the primary sources.

the colonial period, developed from traditional native practices and was shaped by the presence of Europeans. *Wampum*'s evolution is closely tied to the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans, and evolved in tandem with their ongoing relations.

Soon after regular trade, voyages began along the coasts of what would become known as New England and New Netherland. First the Dutch, and then the English, discovered *wampum*'s value to the indigenous peoples. The Dutch first made the most of this, discovering that the peoples of Long Island Sound harvested whelk and other shellfish, out of which they made shell ornaments including discoidal and tubular beads. They also discovered that the inland peoples, particularly the Iroquoian speakers, placed a great demand upon the tubular beads, which the Dutch referred to as *sewant*, and the English commonly referred to as *wampum* or *peak*.<sup>12</sup> This discovery by the Dutch helped to open up and sustain the fur trade with the Iroquois. This led to two additional developments. First, the cash-poor colonies of New Netherland, Plymouth, and Massachusetts Bay soon adopted *wampum* as their local currency.<sup>13</sup> Second, the makers of *wampum* soon made significant changes to their pattern of subsistence and habitation. The traditionally migratory people became more sedentary, establishing themselves in year-round villages and dedicating themselves to full-time *wampum* production. As fur supplies dwindled and dependency upon European goods grew, these people took advantage of the *wampum* trade to secure for themselves a stronger position in the trade with Europe.<sup>14</sup>

While *wampum* would continue to function in the fur trade, it would not sustain its role as currency in the colonial economy. By the late seventeenth century, traditional European currency – gold and silver – became more common in the colonies and eventually displaced *wampum*.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, however, the nature of *wampum* and its use evolved in the diplomatic realm.

Europeans came to North America to trade, to settle, and to expand their empires, and in doing so interacted with native people on a variety of levels. From the beginning, as Europeans and Native Americans met one another they made efforts at accommodation and cooperation, even while conflict also erupted. Such efforts

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12 Both are Algonquian terms. *Sewant* refers to the individual beads regardless of colour. *Wampum*, short for *wampumpeague*, specifically refers to the white beads. Hamell 1996: 42–43.

13 As did Rhode Island, New Haven and Connecticut. In addition to *wampum*, furs also served for currencies of exchange.

14 Otto 2006: 66–68. Eventually, Europeans would begin to manufacture *wampum*. During the eighteenth century, such *wampum* production was conducted in Euro-American factories such as the Campbell factory in New Jersey; see Morse 2006: 1–6. The growing value of *wampum* led to important changes among the Narragansetts and Pequots in the relations with New England culminating in the Pequot War. See Ceci 1990; Cave 1996 and Salisbury 1992: 203–235.

15 Herman 1956: 21–33.

usually took place in the context of ritual exchange and transfer, such as when Henry Hudson and his crew exchanged European-manufactured goods with the indigenous people for diverse food products, animal skins, and “stropes of beads”.<sup>16</sup> As contact continued and expanded, it became clear to both sides how radically different the culture of the other was, and how volatile their relations with one another could be. However, it also became clear how the accommodation of one another’s rituals might smooth these relations. Little by little, the successful cultural engagements that took place created patterns that could be repeated and built upon. Over the next several decades, as Europeans and Indians encountered one another throughout North America, they adapted to and even adopted one another’s rituals. In the colonial northeast, *wampum* figured prominently in this exchange and modification of rituals. These rituals were largely rooted in Iroquoian practices, but by the late seventeenth century, a recognisable model of “frontier diplomacy”, including both Europeans and Indians, had emerged, which continued throughout the eighteenth century even as it expanded and continued to evolve.<sup>17</sup>

This frontier diplomacy included several elements.<sup>18</sup> In the first place, guests, especially to an Indian village, would be conducted through the Wood’s Edge Ceremony in which strings or belts of *wampum* would be given to clear the eyes, ears, and throat of the recipient. Next, they would be hosted at a feast and given a good night’s rest. Once the proceedings began, the first order of business generally consisted of some effort to re-establish the basis of the relationship that brought the two sides together. This would include a rehearsal of past agreements and was usually accompanied by the presentation of *wampum*. One side would speak, iterating previous agreements and presenting a string or belt. The next side would acknowledge the presentation and reiterate the previous agreement, typically presenting another string or belt.

After this important step, the two sides could move towards a discussion of the matters at hand. Here strings or belts played a different role – the *wampum* served to certify the qualifications of the speaker and to authenticate the words being spoken [Image 2]. Following a predetermined agenda, a speaker from one side would come forward and would lay upon the ground or table strings or belts of *wampum*. Each of these would represent a different point to be made in the forthcoming presentation. As the speaker delivered his message, he would pick up a string or belt with each new point. For native people, *wampum* reinforced the message and made the speaker’s words “true”. Words that were accompanied by *wampum* could be

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16 Quoted in Otto 2006: 42.

17 The best recent discussion of *wampum* and frontier diplomacy is Merrell 1999: 187–193.

18 This broad summary of frontier diplomacy is drawn from my reading of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, some of which are noted elsewhere in this essay. Richter 2001, Fenton 1985, and Foster 1985 carefully delineate the various steps of Iroquois diplomacy.

trusted. Finally, as agreements were made, and the meeting moved towards closure, Europeans would draw up treaties or some record of the agreement that would be signed by both Europeans and Indians; appended to these were *wampun* belts that symbolised the agreement.

*Wampum* was central to frontier diplomacy and actively utilised by both sides. In his account of the Moravian missions of the eighteenth century, George Henry Loskiel described one variation of the practice:

“Upon the delivery of a string, a long speech may be made, and much said upon the subject under consideration: But when a belt is given, few words are spoken, but they must be words of great importance, frequently requiring an explanation. Whenever the speaker has pronounced some important sentence, he delivers a string of *wampum*, adding, “I give this string of wampum as a confirmation of what I have spoken.” But the chief subject of his discourse he confirms with a belt. The answers given to a speech thus delivered, must also be confirmed by strings and belts of *wampum* of the same size and number as those received.”<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, *wampum* served mnemonically, aiding the speaker in remembering his message. He might brandish it in such a way as to reinforce his message, or, possibly, the belt or string were understood by native people as embodying the message itself. This is how it was understood as reported in the nineteenth century, and may have been so also in the seventeenth.<sup>20</sup> And when each point had been made, the speaker would lay the *wampum* down again, hand it to his listeners, or display it in some other way. Europeans, too, would use it in this way by sending messages with *wampum* belts, such as when Sir William Johnson, British Superintendent of Indian Affairs, sent belts in 1758 to the Iroquois to summon them to war against the French.<sup>21</sup>

Over time, *wampum*’s mnemonic role was enhanced with the incorporation of simple designs woven into the belt in alternating white and black beads. Eventually larger belts were developed in which pictographs were displayed [Images 3 and 4]. Such designs might convey broad messages of friendship, alliance, or war. Large *wampum* belts containing significant symbols and designs would be woven to capture the essence of a treaty agreement between the two sides.<sup>22</sup> Contact with Europeans contributed to this evolution of *wampum* in several ways. First, European tools made possible the wider production of *wampum* beads, providing for

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19 Loskiel 1794: 27.

20 Foster 1985: 106–107.

21 Abercromby Papers: AB 364.

22 These include fairly well-known belts such as the Penn or Great Treaty *Wampum* Belt that supposedly depicts a colonist and Indian holding hands. There is some debate on the authenticity of this belt and the provenance of other belts with pictorial designs. Speck 1925.



larger belts and more frequent use of belts and strings. Second, these tools also made possible the use of dark shell for “black” beads. Thus, the geometric and pictographic designs clearly resulted from European contact. Third, European traders seeking new sources of furs, and colonial officials advancing political and imperial agendas, created a new context of competition and struggle in North America in which *wampum* served to help build alliances and agreements to accomplish those aims.

Native people, however, had their own agendas, and even as *wampum* belts evolved, native people employed them in traditional ways. With its focus upon social cohesion, native diplomacy regularly employed a variety of metaphors to advance such relationships. Indians would commonly speak of rekindling or keeping the council fires burning, burying the hatchet, clearing the paths between villages, or maintaining long-standing friendships, among many others. As pictographic belts developed, many of these included motifs that closely paralleled these traditional metaphors.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, even as Europeans began to accommodate Indian ways, they still recognised the important differences between written records and oral traditions, even if they did not fully understand the power of the oral traditions. In a major meeting (1659) between Dutch officials and leaders of the Mohawk people in one of the earliest cases of Europeans giving *wampum* to punctuate points of their speeches in native fashion, the Dutch speaker encouraged his native listeners to “tell it to your children” since “our children will always be able to know and remember it through the writings which we leave behind us; we die but they remain forever. From them they will always be able to see how we have lived in friendship with our brothers.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the lingering differences of understanding, the two sides had still come to adopt a common set of protocols, which lasted until the late eighteenth century. But as important as *wampum* had become to frontier diplomacy from the late seventeenth century into the eighteenth, and through much of the eighteenth century, its importance began to decline after the American Revolution. By the 1780s, the Iroquois began to demand copies of written treaties. Many reasons for this are possible. Observing their deteriorating position on their land and with respect to their declining influence upon European and Euro-American governments, native people had learned that agreements could be broken or reinterpreted. As a result, they may have chosen to eschew the place of *wampum* in favour of the *copia vera* of written treaties. Perhaps they also came to lack confidence in the durability of their oral traditions as supported by treaty belts. Also, as the Euro-American frontier moved westward, the Iroquois and Hurons found themselves left behind, so to speak, as important diplomatic players. As a result, fewer treaties in total were be-

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23 Foster 1985: 109.

24 Gehring 1990: 456–457.

ing signed by native people who traditionally used *wampum* and the respective colonial or national governments.<sup>25</sup> For their part, the Americans, too, understood the strengths and weaknesses of the treaty belts. At the Fort Stanwix Treaty negotiations of 1784, the Iroquois representatives wanted copies of the proceedings, but the U.S. delegates “refused [them] a copy of [the officials’] speech.” They asserted that the *wampum* belts accompanying the proceedings should be enough. “We explained [...] over and over again our speech to you”, they said, “and the strings and belts which accompanied every part of it.”<sup>26</sup> After about 1800, the rituals of frontier diplomacy centring upon *wampum* belts ended.

How do the emergence of *wampum* and the creation of colonial America frontier diplomacy compare with the parameters of ritual transfer outlined by Robert Langer and his fellow researchers? The example of *wampum* as a dynamic material artifact playing a role in an ever-changing social and cultural context offers an important case for evaluating Langer’s concepts regarding the transfer of rituals. At the same time, the application of this transfer model to the study of *wampum* offers insight into a historical process that has not been considered in the light of anthropological theories.

The authors assert that when the context for the ritual changes, it can be expected that some of its internal dimensions might also change. The inverse may also be true, the authors suggest, so that when a change of internal dimensions is observed, one should look for changing context. In the case of the early American frontier, where two culturally distinct groups came together as indigenous and intruder, it is obvious that the context had changed. One assumes that new rituals are likely to develop and, as the story of *wampum* diplomacy reveals, such cross-cultural rituals did develop. On the other hand, frontier relations were ever-changing, as Europeans advanced deeper into the continent, meeting new and different groups of native people, as the objects of Native American and European envoys changed, and as the colonial and imperial context also evolved. A close study of the particulars of frontier diplomacy may point to important changes in the broader ritual and the changing cultural context. When and how, for example, did belts begin to incorporate patterns and designs? Who initiated these changes and why? Did such changes reflect the response of one group to the cultural demands and expectations of the other group?

With respect to the nature of that contextual change, Langer et al. assert three forms of ritual transfer – synchronic, diachronic, and recursive. Which one applies

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25 Becker 2002: 61–62.

26 At the Treaty of Ft. Stanwix in 1784, the Iroquois tried in vain to get a paper copy of the treaty, but the U.S. delegates said that the *wampum* belt they gave should be sufficient, Graymont 1922: 16–17, 279–280; Craig 1848: 424. In fact, Iroquois began making these requests as early as the 1750s and by the 1790s copies of treaties had replaced *wampum* belts in these diplomatic proceedings; Becker & Lainey 2004: 27.

best to ritual transfers involving *wampum*? Synchronic transfer takes place when a part of a group changes one contextual aspect, for example geographical, but not others, such as religious, as, for example, when a part of a group migrates to a new location but keeps its basic cultural values intact. Diachronic transfer takes place when a group remains in one geographic location, but changes take place in the historical context. Finally, recursive transfers indicate reciprocal influences from group members who have migrated away from and then back to the root group.

In the case of diplomatic rituals involving *wampum*, ritual transfer does not neatly fit into any one of these categories. The recursive is probably the least applicable, since what is under consideration here is not a case of changes strictly within the group of origin. Since the ritual changes resulted from the meeting of two cultural groups – one indigenous and one invasive – characteristics of both the synchronic and the diachronic come into play.

For Europeans who took with them their ideas on diplomacy, treaty making, and so forth to the New World, the changes they made as they adapted to Indian diplomacy were synchronic in nature. Their values did not change, but their geographic context, including new cultural elements (native society) which they had to accommodate to accomplish their goals, did. They learned that they could only negotiate effectively with the Indians by engaging in important social and diplomatic rituals, and by punctuating their speeches with belts of *wampum*. For Europeans, this was a utilitarian adaptation. While Europeans and Euro-Americans may have adopted the use of *wampum* in frontier diplomacy, it does not appear that this adoption ever amounted to more than just an accommodation to Indian practices in order to gain what they really sought – trade agreements, Indian alliances, or territory.

For native people who essentially remained in one geographic location, their transfer was diachronic in nature – their historical context changed as a result of contact with Europeans. While the meaning and purpose of *wampum* belts seemed to persist, native people applied the dark beads made available by European tools to the development of belts with designs and pictographs memorialising specific messages or aspects of their treaties with Europeans. Eventually the use of belts in diplomacy fell away altogether.<sup>27</sup> Believing in the efficacy of these rituals, Native Americans shaped and transformed diplomatic rituals in order to facilitate relations with Europeans, and to address a changing context that posed serious challenges to their livelihood, their place on the land, and their political sovereignty.

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27 However, a recursive element may have come into play as native people migrated west to escape the onslaught of European colonisation, and contributed to a crucible of frontier activity in the Ohio country, where they brought with them frontier diplomatic practices created in their homelands to the east. There is a synchronic aspect here as well, especially as a new frontier diplomacy emerged in the eighteenth century.

Furthermore, it should be understood that the adaptations made by both peoples took place in the context of important power relations. Each side had something the other needed and wanted. Whoever held the balance of power could influence the shape frontier diplomacy took and the role *wampum* would play in it. On the one hand, native people controlled access to the fur trade, to territory, and to military resources in the form of Indian auxiliaries. On the other hand, Europeans offered access to trade goods, guns, and to *wampum* itself in their role as middlemen. Europeans could not gain what they wanted without the cooperation of Indians. Native people stood between them and many of their objectives. To gain native cooperation, Europeans were forced to adapt to diplomatic practices that made sense to the Indians.<sup>28</sup> For their part, Native Americans were not invincible occupants and found their sovereignty over their territory eroding as profound changes took place within their society. They acted as they could to maintain control over their land and to assert their political sovereignty and cultural values by insisting on diplomatic rituals that made sense to them. In fact, they continued to seek regular and frequent meetings with colonial officials with the aim of renewing, reinforcing, and strengthening these alliances through speeches punctuated with symbolically ornamented belts. As power shifted from Native Americans to Europeans, these efforts became increasingly fruitless, and native people were forced to accept loss of status and the power to maintain relationships with Europeans that were advantageous to themselves.

According to the authors of “Transfer of Ritual”, the actions of individual agents should also be taken into account. They write: “A special position must be admitted to the participants, i.e. the actively and passively participating persons [...] without them a ritual cannot be performed.” This is an important point, but in the case of frontier diplomacy, data may not be available to fully answer it. Langer et al. indicated that there are active and passive participants. Active participants are those who are directly involved in the rituals, while passive participants are those who observe and benefit from the rituals, but do not play an active role in them. In the case of frontier diplomacy and the evolving use of *wampum*, we can certainly point to individuals who prominently participated in frontier diplomacy. Indeed, historians have already considered how cultural mediators have played a role on the frontier. These individuals had the cultural awareness and flexibility to build bridges of communication and cooperation across the cultural divide.<sup>29</sup>

The historical record only occasionally provides enough details to help us understand the particular role of unique individuals in the actual ritual transfer involving *wampum*. As noted above, such evidence would be helpful in tracing the

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28 Daniel Richter demonstrates the unique strengths held by the Five Nations Iroquois because of their geographical location and their political stability; Richter 1992: 2–3.

29 See, for example, Richter 1988: 40–67 and Cayton & Teute 1998.

evolution of *wampum* diplomacy. Furthermore, pinpointing individuals who actively shaped the ritual transfers on the frontier helps to get at the issue of diplomatic power struggles, which in turn affect the evolution of *wampum* and frontier diplomacy. Surely, certain European individuals first chose to give *wampum* as they spoke diplomatic words, and individual natives first incorporated pictographs into specific *wampum* belts. In the case of Europeans, it can be demonstrated that traders were often at the forefront of frontier diplomacy, and that these individuals, some of whom served also as translators, undoubtedly paved the way for European accommodation to Indian diplomacy. But who these individuals were on either side, what specifically motivated them, and how they actually implemented the changes outlined (especially the change in the nature of *wampum* belts), is rarely revealed in the sources. Occasionally, however, individuals do stand out such as Arendt van Curler or Corlaer, as he was known by the Mohawks. Van Curler had come to New Netherland in 1637 to assist in managing the estate of Kiliaen van Rensselaer. He became an astute trader and often served as a mediator between the Dutch and the Indians until his death in 1667. He was important enough to the Iroquois that after his death they applied his name – “Corlaer” – to the succeeding colonial governors with whom they negotiated. It is likely that in the 1659 Dutch-Mohawk conference noted earlier, he led or influenced the Dutch delegation as they gave *wampum* while speaking their points to the Mohawks. But such examples are few and far between, and the process by which Europeans and Native Americans created shared diplomatic rituals remains vague.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, my research into *wampum* raises an issue not adequately addressed in the article by Langer and his fellow authors. The authors discuss changing contexts, changes to internal dimensions, and the role of individuals in the ritual transfers. While the authors do not imply as much, however, it would be possible to infer from their presentation that the rituals themselves, or the individual rites, were static before major contextual changes prompted ritual transfers or certain individuals brought about those transfers. This is particularly an issue in considering ritual change on the frontier.

*Wampum* was clearly an evolving material artifact and its use among native people varied from group to group and evolved over time. *Wampum* beads evolved in size and uniformity, and contact with Europeans and their tools influenced this. “True *wampum*” did not really exist before the arrival of Europeans, but it was “true *wampum*” that was soon being employed by Indian groups as Europeans penetrated into the interior and developed closer relationships with the indigenous people. *Wampum* belts developed among Iroquoian speakers and their near neighbours, but *wampum* beads were used in different ways by various groups in the Northeast. Even among the Five Nations and the Hurons, variations existed in the

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30 Otto 2009: 184; Richter 1988: 46.

application and manifestation of *wampum*. Therefore, while we can explore the transfer of rituals and the development of new ones, the dynamic situation of the American environment and the European-Native American frontier makes it difficult to carefully delineate pre-existing rituals and to identify specific transfers.

Considering the fact that *wampum*'s evolving role in the new frontier diplomacy, which provided a means for Europeans and Native Americans to negotiate with one another in North America, seems to reflect a unique example of ritual transfer, perhaps an additional category should be added to Langer and his fellow researchers' rubric. Recognising the contribution of both sides, the shifting power relationships, and the dynamic context in which this ritual transfer took place, is it not worth considering the category of *synergetic*?<sup>31</sup> This term captures the flexible, two-way nature of the exchange and provides a single category in which to place this variety of ritual transfer. The example of the early American frontier is one in which both sides had something to offer and both sides had something to gain. Contributions were made by both groups in a give-and-take struggle of power to achieve ends specific to each group. Out of this matrix emerged a ritual – frontier diplomacy, including the exchange and presentation of *wampum* strings and belts (themselves products of intercultural contact) – that would not have emerged in any other context.

To sum up, the emergence of frontier diplomacy centring upon *wampum* in the colonial northeast both reinforces the ritual transfer matrix outlined by Langer et al. and offers some variations worth considering. As expected, the changing context experienced by both Native Americans and Europeans led to changes in their diplomatic behaviour. Both sides changed or modified their protocols to accommodate the demands of the frontier context. Europeans adapted to Indian social expectations by patiently listening to Indian grievances, and by giving strings or belts of *wampum* as they spoke about their own concerns. Native people introduced Europeans to *wampum*, but also adapted European tools that contributed to an evolution in size and style as *wampum* belts grew larger and began to include symbols and pictographs. Eventually, *wampum* use in frontier diplomacy declined and then fell away all together.

Nevertheless, even as the ritual transfer reflected by evolving *wampum* use and the emergence of frontier diplomacy confirms the theories set forth by Langer and his co-authors, important differences remain. In the first place, the categories of synchronic and diachronic seem too restrictive to adequately describe what happened. With both sides accommodating one another in a new intercultural context, what developed were not so much changes to the rituals of the one or the other group, but the creation of new rituals which reflected the new cultural context, a process which might best be described as *synergetic*. In the second place, if it is

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31 I thank Richard Johnson for suggesting this term.

assumed that rituals are to some degree static before a contextual change brings about the transfer of rites, then the evolution of *wampum* as an artifact, even before the arrival of Europeans, points to real difficulties in trying to establish a baseline for analysing ritual transfer.

Let me conclude by observing that my consideration of the development of frontier diplomacy in North America with the attendant evolution of *wampum* in the light of the ritual transfer matrix has aided me as a researcher in teasing out certain nuances in *wampum*'s story. Perhaps the story of *wampum*'s development in the early American frontier will, in turn, indicate ways in which the theory of ritual transfer should also be further developed.

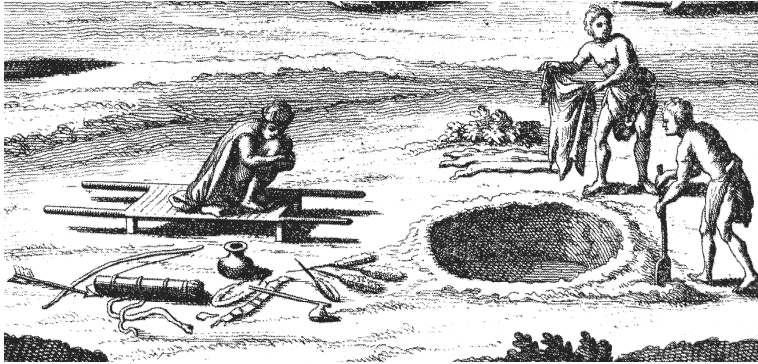


Image 1: Burial ceremonies among the Iroquois  
 Source: Lafitau 1724: Vol 2, Plate XX

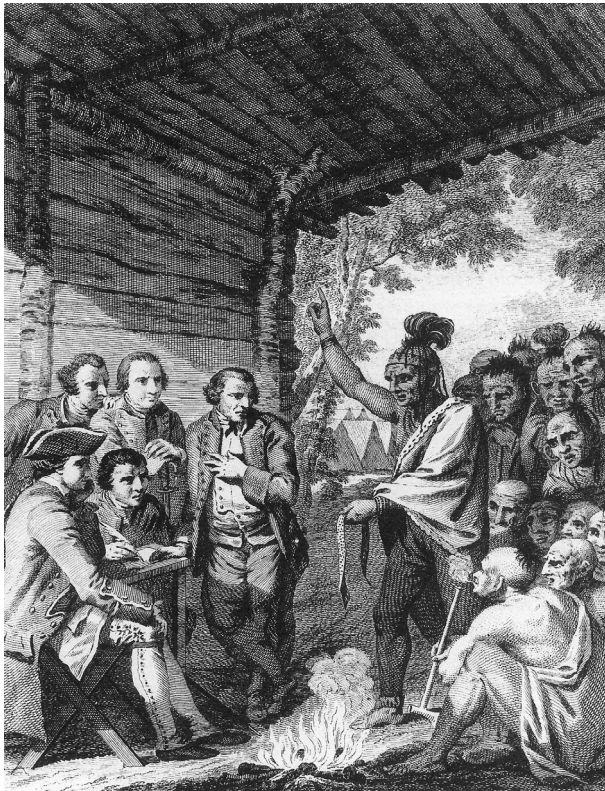


Image 2: The Indians Giving a Talk to Colonel  
 Bouquet  
 Source: Smith 1766, between pages 52 and 53



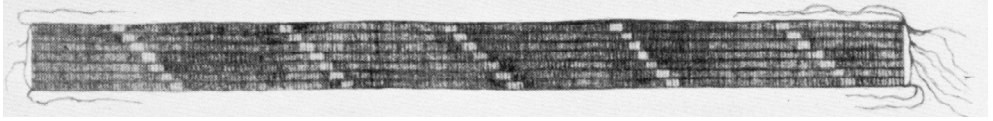


Image 3: Ordinary Belt of seven rows from near Georgian bay, Canada  
Source: Beauchamp 1901: Plate 23.

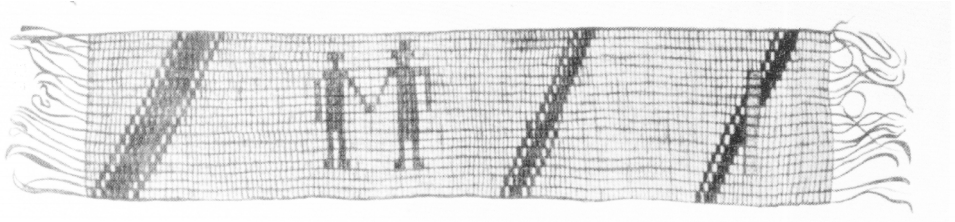


Image 4: "Penn" Belt  
Source: Beauchamp 1901: Plate 13.

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