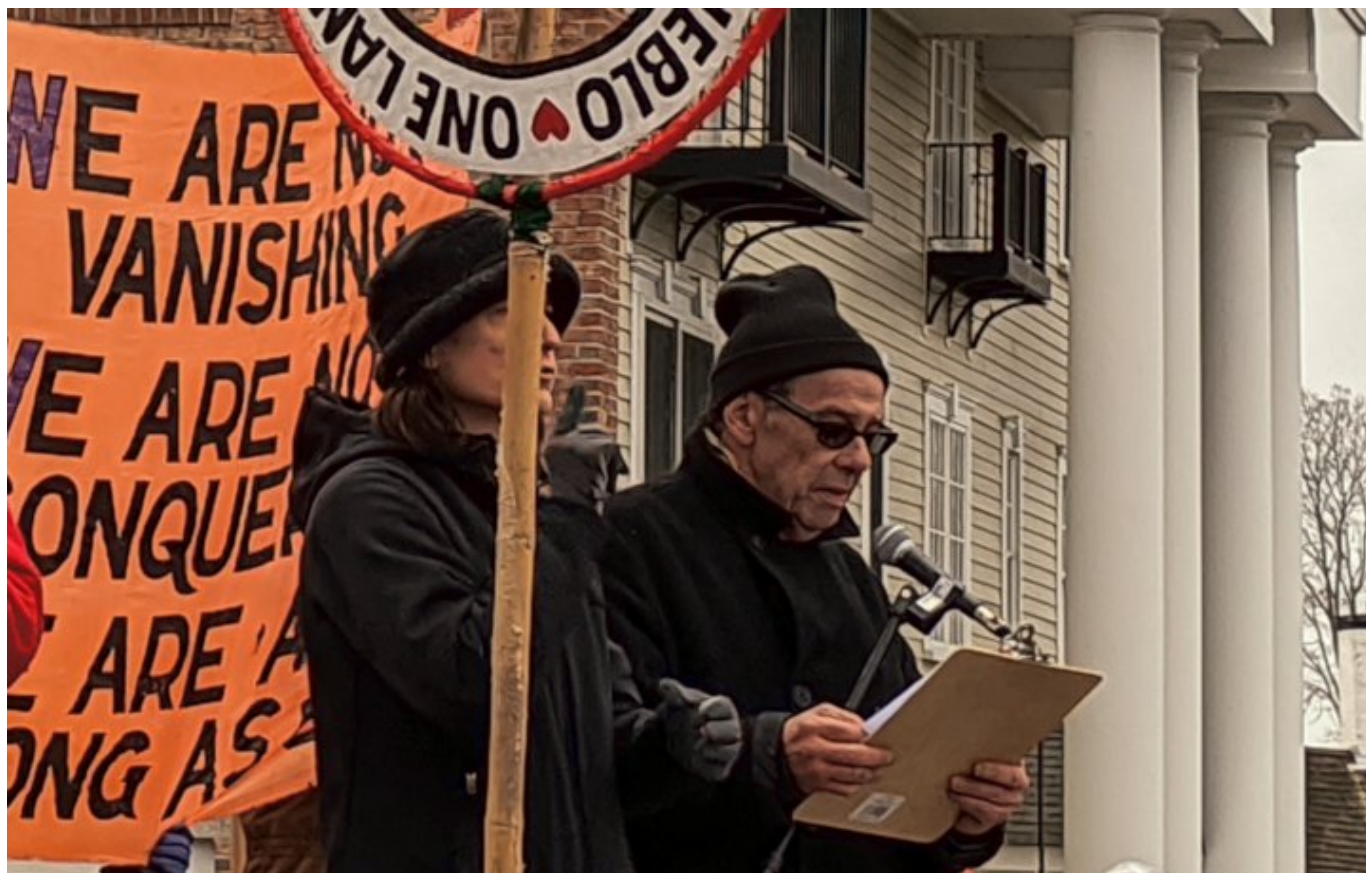




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Moonanum James: ‘The Thanksgiving myth celebrates genocide’

written by Moonanum James
December 4, 2019



Moonanum James, co-leader of United American Indians of New England. SLL photo: Greg Butterfield

Talk given at the 50th National Day of Mourning in Plymouth, Mass., on Nov. 28, 2019.

Once again on the fourth Thursday in November, [United American Indians of New England](https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2019/12/04/moonanum-james-the-thanksgiving-myth-celebrates-genocide/) and those who support us are gathered on this hill to observe a National Day of Mourning. Today marks the 50th time we have come here, in all kinds of weather, to mourn our ancestors and speak the truth about our history.

Those who started National Day of Mourning could not have envisioned that generations would still be here, year after year, carrying on this tradition. Many of the elders who stood on this hill and organized the first Day of Mourning are no

longer with us, but we feel their spirits guiding us today. We are thinking today of so many, including Shirley Mills, a beautiful person who passed into the spirit world this fall. We mourn her loss here today.

Fifty Thanksgivings ago, my father, an Aquinnah Wampanoag named Wamsutta Frank James, was invited to address a gathering celebrating the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the Pilgrims. When asked by the organizers to provide an advance copy of the speech he planned to deliver, Wamsutta agreed. When they saw his speech, the planners told him he could speak only if he were willing to offer false praise of the Pilgrims.

According to the organizers of the event, “The theme of the celebration is brotherhood and anything inflammatory would be out of place.” The organizers even offered to write a speech for him, one which would better fit with their settler-colonialist narrative. He refused to have words put into his mouth, and National Day of Mourning came into being as a result of that refusal. Instead of speaking at the banquet, he and a group of allies from throughout the Americas gathered here, on this hill, and observed the first National Day of Mourning in 1970.

A tradition of struggle

That first year, my father never did get a chance to deliver his speech on this hill — although some who don’t actually know our history say he did. Maybe 100 or 200 Native people and allies gathered, depending on which person is giving their recollection of the day. Indigenous peoples from this region and members of the Boston Indian Center organized and were joined by others, including some famous members of the American Indian Movement. They spoke out about the Pilgrim invasion and issues throughout Indian Country, marched around Plymouth, boarded the Mayflower II replica, and even buried Plymouth Rock in sand — a tradition I am proud to say we continued well into the 1990s.

In the 1970s, UAIINE demanded the return of Wampanoag artifacts, including bones, that were being held by the gravedigger settlers at the Pilgrim Society Museum. At the fourth National Day of Mourning, the bones were returned to my father and given a proper burial. In 1972, the police followed us around with police dogs, and a young woman, Judy Mendes, who had a U.S. flag draped around her shoulders, was attacked and arrested.

Over the years, we repeatedly disrupted the Pilgrim Progress parade, a tradition we continued until 1996. The following year, in 1997, we were blocked on Leyden Street and arrested without warning when we simply tried to march. The resulting defense of the Plymouth 25 led to the National Day of Mourning plaque you see here on Cole's Hill, and the Metacomet plaque we will visit when we march.

Consistently, our organization has not collaborated with the Pilgrims or their institutions, whether museums or the Mayflower Society or the Plymouth 400. We have our own story to tell, in our own way. Consistently, we have sought to present issues that Indigenous people are facing internationally, not just here, because we are indeed all related.

Pilgrim myth vs. Indigenous truth

So, what really happened at the first Thanksgiving — or what some of us call the first “thanks-taking?” According to popular myth, the Pilgrims, seeking religious freedom, landed on Plymouth Rock. The Indians welcomed them with open arms, and then conveniently faded into the background and everyone lived happily ever after. The end.

Here is the truth:

First, the Pilgrims are glorified and mythologized because the circumstances of the first permanent English colony in North America, Jamestown, were too ugly to hold

up as an effective national myth. There are efforts now to teach schoolchildren about the African slaves kept at Jamestown. But no curriculum seems to want to teach the kids about settler cannibalism. Pilgrims and Indians are a much more marketable story.

Second, the Pilgrims came here as part of a commercial venture. They didn't need religious freedom — they already had that back in the Netherlands. The Mayflower Compact was merely a group of white men who wanted to ensure they would get a return on their investment.

When they arrived — on outer Cape Cod, by the way, not on that pebble down the hill — one of the first things the Pilgrims did was to rob the Wampanoag graves at Corn Hill and steal as much of their winter provisions of corn and beans as they were able to carry. The writings of the colonists themselves describe these actions taking place.

The next part of the mythology is true: Some Wampanoag ancestors did welcome the Pilgrims and save them from starvation. And what did we get in return for this kindness? Genocide, the theft of our lands, slavery, starvation and never-ending repression.

The first 'thanks-taking'

It is also important to remember that the first official Thanksgiving did not take place in 1621 when the Pilgrims had a harvest-time meal provided largely by the Wampanoag. Instead it was officially proclaimed by Gov. Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1637 to celebrate the massacre of over 700 Pequot men, women and children on the banks of the Mystic River in Connecticut.

William Bradford of the Plymouth colony wrote of this event: "Those that escaped the fire were slain with the sword; some hewed to pieces, others run through with

their rapiers ... they thus destroyed about 400 at the time. It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire ... horrible was the stink and scent thereof, but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the prayers thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them."

And yet the history books call us the savages.

So why does any of this matter? It is simple: When people perpetuate the myth of Thanksgiving, they are not only erasing our genocide, but also celebrating it.

But we did not simply fade into the background as the Thanksgiving myth says. We have survived and thrived. We have persevered. The very fact that you are here is proof that we did not vanish. Our very presence frees this land from the lies of the history books and the mythmakers. We will remember and honor all of our ancestors in the struggle who went before us. We will speak truth to power as we have been doing since the first Day of Mourning in 1970.

That first Day of Mourning in 1970 was a powerful demonstration of Native unity. It has continued for 50 years as a powerful demonstration of Indigenous unity and of the unity of all people who speak truth to power.

Capitalist crimes in Indian Country

Sadly, many of the conditions that prevailed in Indian Country in 1970 still prevail today. In 1970, our average life expectancy was just 44 years. Today, it is up, but for Native men, it is still six years below that of white people. Native women's death rate has increased 20 percent over the past 15 years. In 1970, the average Native yearly income was \$4,347. In 2019, 20 percent of Native people still earn under \$5,000. In 1970, our suicide and infant mortality rates were the highest in the country. This has not changed.

We all know that racism is alive and well. All of us are struggling under the

oppression of a capitalist system which forces people to make a bitter choice between healing and eating. We will continue to gather on this hill until corporations and the U.S. military stop polluting the Earth. Until we dismantle the brutal apparatus of mass incarceration.

We will not stop until the oppression of our Two-Spirit siblings is a thing of the past. When the homeless have homes. When children are no longer taken from their parents and locked in cages. When the Palestinians reclaim the homeland and the autonomy Israel has denied them for the past 70 years. When no person goes hungry or is left to die because they have little or no access to quality health care. When insulin is free. When union-busting is a thing of the past. Until then, the struggle will continue.

In 1970, we demanded an end to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It is still a demand today. Native nations should not need federal oversight to govern ourselves or take control of our own lands.

I hope you will stand with the Mashpee Wampanoag and support pending legislation that would give Mashpee the right to petition for land to be taken into trust. And please tell your congresspeople that this legislation should also be applied to Aquinnah and other tribes that were federally recognized after 1934.

As we did in 1970, we mourn the loss of millions of our ancestors and the devastation of the land, water and air.

We condemn all acts of violence and terrorism perpetrated by all governments and organizations against innocent people worldwide. Since the invasion of Columbus and the rest of the Europeans, Native people have been virtually nonstop victims of terrorism. From the colonial period to the 21st century, this has entailed torture, massacres, systematic military occupations and the forced removals of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homelands.

Let us not forget that this country was founded on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft. Let us not forget that under the pipelines, skyscrapers, mines and oil rigs, lie the interred bones, sacred objects and villages of our Native ancestors.

On our program will be only Indigenous speakers. This is one day when we speak for ourselves, without non-Native people, so-called “experts,” intervening to interpret and speak for us.

Today, on liberated territory, we will correct the history of a country that continues to glorify butchers such as Christopher Columbus, that makes slave-owning presidents such as Washington and Jefferson into god-like figures, and even carves their faces into the sacred Black Hills of the Lakota.

In 1970, very few people would have given any thought to the fact that the Indigenous people of this hemisphere do not look upon the arrival of the European invaders as a reason to give thanks. Today, many thousands stand with us in spirit as we commemorate the 50th National Day of Mourning.

In the spirit of Crazy Horse, in the spirit of Metacom, in the spirit of Geronimo. Above all, to all the people who fight and struggle for real justice.

We are not vanishing. We are not conquered. We are as strong as ever.

