



*A Brief Narrative of the Success [...] among the Indians
of Martha's Vineyard*

Matthew Mayhew (1694)

Matthew Mayhew belonged to an English family who, during the 1600s, governed the island of Martha's Vineyard as their privately held colony. Mayhew wrote the tract from which this selection is taken to advertise the success of Puritan missionary efforts among the Wampanoag people who inhabited the island. The selection shows different ways that English colonists and Wampanoags absorbed one another's beliefs, practices, and presence into their respective religious worldviews.

Having promised an account of the conversion of many Indians inhabiting these parts of America, it may well be expected I should say something of their religion while heathen.

They generally acknowledged and worshipped many gods, therefore greatly esteemed and revered their priests, powaws, or wizards, who were esteemed as having immediate converse with the gods. To them, therefore, they addressed themselves in all difficult cases. Yet could not all who desire that dignity (as they esteemed it) obtain familiarity with the infernal spirits, nor were all powaws alike successful in their addresses, but they become such either by immediate revelation or in the use of certain rites and ceremonies tradition had left as means conducing to that end. Insomuch that parents often, out of certain zeal, dedicated their children to the gods and educated them accordingly, observing certain diet, debarring sleep, etc.; yet of the many thus designed, but few obtained their desire.

Supposing that where the practice of witchcraft has been highly esteemed, there may be given the plainest demonstration of mortals having familiarity with infernal spirits, I am willing to let my reader know that not many years since, died here one of the powaws, who never pretended to astrological knowledge yet could precisely inform such who desired his assistance from whence goods stolen from them were taken and whither carried, with many things of the like nature. Nor was he ever known to endeavor the concealing his knowledge to be immediately from a god subservient to him that the English worshipped. This powaw, being by an Englishman (worthy of credit, who lately informed me of the same) desired to advise him who had stolen certain goods which he had lost, having formerly been an eyewitness of his ability, the powaw, after a little pausing, demanded why he requested that from him since himself served another God—that therefore he could not help him—but added, “If you can believe that my god will help you, I will try what I can do,” which diverted the man from further inquiry.

I must a little digress and tell my reader that this powaw's wife was accounted a godly woman and lived in the practice and profession of the Christian religion, by not only the approbation but encouragement of her husband. She constantly prayed in the family and attended the public worship on the Lord's days. He declared that he could not blame her, for that she served a God who was above his; but that as to himself, his god's continued kindness obliged him not to forsake his service.

That the powaws, by the infernal spirits, often killed persons, caused lameness and impotency, as well as showed their art in performing things beyond human by diabolic skill, such who have

conversed much among them have had no reason to question. [...] Of the cures performed by them on the bewitched, I could give many instances; I shall briefly hint at two.

The one, of an Indian on Martha's Vineyard called afterward George, who, having been some time greatly tormented and now wholly impotent, his friends advised him to the powaws, concluding him to be bewitched. They being met and dancing round a great fire, the sick lying by, some of the neighbors entered the house, being persuaded that a great powaw, now called to cure, had bewitched the sick. They threatened him that, as he had bewitched, unless he would cure the sick man, they would burn him in that fire. After many excuses, too long here to relate, they took him up, resolving at least to a little singe him, who no sooner felt the heat of the fire near him but the sick immediately recovered. This was a thing publicly known to the English, as well as Indians, in the neighborhood; there can be no doubt of it.

The other I shall instance in was a relation from Capt. Thomas Dagget Esq., now deceased, and Richard Sarson Esq., justices of the peace, who, being on an island where a bewitched woman lay in great extremity and wholly impotent, the powaws there having without success endeavored the cure, the related sent to Martha's Vineyard for more famous powaws; the said gentlemen were admitted to be present on certain conditions. The powaws went to dancing, who, with the spectators, used certain ceremonies usual in such cases, one of the powaws praying to his god with such ardent desires and fervency that Capt. Dagget told me had it been to the true God, it had been a prayer exceeding most that he had heard. The issue was, they in a deer skin caught the spirit (as they said) which entered the woman; this, they said, was the spirit of an Englishman drowned in the adjacent sound. Yet, it was then supposed, the powaw was [near]by, which bewitched her. The issue was, she immediately recovered. The powaw told her unless she removed to Martha's Vineyard, she would again be sick; for, being an English spirit, he could not long confine it.

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A personal name missing from the digital transcript of the 1694 edition has been restored from the printing that appears in Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England [...]* (Hartford, [CT]: Silas Andrus, 1820), 2:370, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b5310953>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. A footnote in the source publication omitted. An additional paragraph break inserted for readability. A preposition relocated within a sentence to improve a parallel structure. Some verbs changed from present tense to past for consistency. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and typography (italics) emended in line with modern American conventions. As part of that modernization, many words capitalized in the source publication have been converted here to lowercase; among them are the terms *priests*, *wizards*, and *powaws*, referring to indigenous practitioners, as well as *revelation*, *rites*, *ceremonies*, *witchcraft*, *infernal spirits*, *astrological*, *religion*, *public worship*, *cures*, and more. The spelling *powaw* replicates the source, as does the capitalizing or not of *god/God*.

These edited excerpts from Mayhew's tract are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the source publications listed above.



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