Wampum and Its Role in the Formation of an Interdependence between Iroquois and Europeans in the 1600’s
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Throughout the 17th century, trade between the Iroquois, English, and Dutch necessitated the establishment of a uniform medium of exchange. Wampum, “a tiny, tubular-shaped shell bead”¹ became the preferred currency of the Native and European groups across what is now New York State. Though the strings of shells came to have economic importance, they were culturally significant to the Iroquois prior to European contact as they served to console the bereaved and provided the diplomatic function of showing commitment and honesty. The dynamic nature of wampum must be considered as its evolution indicates the capability to assign new meaning to the beads without sacrificing their established historical significance. Both Natives and Europeans shared a common incentive for satisfying the material demand of their culture, and did so with the use of wampum. Neither group remained static in their understanding of trade, as the Europeans adopted a new form of currency and the Iroquois began to seek economic gain. Wampum served as an intercontinental link between the distinct cultures of the Iroquois and that of the English and Dutch traders, as it manifested a system dependent on cooperation. Analyzing the interdependence between the Iroquois and Europeans, created by the use of wampum, will demonstrate that the two groups shared a strong focus on the rationalistic concept of utilitarian pursuits, without disregarding the Iroquois cultural significance of the patterned beads.

Before European contact, the Iroquois used wampum as a method to demonstrate what was truthful in a discussion by giving tangible properties to spoken words. The traditional significance of the beads can be seen in the Epic of the Peacemaker, one of the three foundational stories that recounts the beginning of the Iroquois Confederacy. The Peacemaker, Dekanawida, is an Iroquois cultural hero who journeyed for a time with an Onondaga Chief named Hayonwhatha who was

greatly troubled by the death of his daughters. In an effort to console the bereaved chief, Dekanawida made an address augmented by the presence of strings of wampum. As Dekanawida spoke, the wampum beads he handed to Hayonwhatha lent his words sincerity in order to fully heal his companion. Upon completion of the address, Hayonwhatha had the duty to reply to and return each bead he received, creating a relationship centered on equality and reciprocity. The talk concluded with Hayonwhatha’s return to a social state as he “was made clear”2 conveying the functionality of wampum as a method to console another while articulating a strong focus on reciprocity. Though Dekanawida and Hayonwhatha were members of two different nations, the strings of beads created a bond of unity between them. The diplomatic function of wampum can be seen to persist even after the onset of European trade as is seen when two Onondaga correspondents in 1685 relate a message to an Albany court that, “wee may all live in Peace & Tranquility together” and conclude their address as they “doe give a Belt of wampum”3 solidifying their words in the gift of wampum. In each instance wampum served the purpose of giving truth to spoken words.

The idea of a binary of either romantic or rationalistic principles representing the only two motivations for Native American decisions after the arrival of Europeans is argued by Bruce Trigger in Early Native North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalistic Interpretations. Romanticism is defined as culturally specific “determinates of human behavior” while “the rationalist claim is that human behavior is shaped mainly by calculations of individual self-interest that are uniform from one culture to another”4. Though a compelling argument is formulated around the dominance of rationalist thought, Trigger fails to consider the lasting traditional significance of elements of native cultures. By limiting the interpretation of past events to an either

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2 The Dekanawida Legend.” New York State Museum no. 24
3 Livingston Indian Records no. 93
or proposition, the complexity of human nature, regardless of the discussed culture, is removed from consideration. Trigger argues a shift occurred in the thinking of native tribes after they observed Europeans, in that they “appreciated the material benefits to be derived from many items of European technology and that they sought to utilize this technology even at the cost of growing dependence”. Dependency negates the existence of continued cultural practices of the Native Americans by attempting to limit the influence the tribes had over their own actions. As is argued by archeologist Dean R. Snow “the Iroquois were not utterly dependent upon those goods, and would not be for another two centuries” contrasting the idea that European goods replaced the cultural foundations of Natives. Though an argument could made to fit into either extreme of the logical binary created between romanticism and rationalism, the most appropriate analysis would come from a combination of the two that accounts for the concern to maximize utility, while upholding the importance of cultural beliefs. European contact provided the means to gain culturally significant items, such as wampum, on a larger scale, allowing the shell beads to take on a dynamic function between Iroquois and European societies in America.

The use of wampum as currency between the Iroquois and English and Dutch can be linked to its satisfaction of the six characteristics of money, in that it was durable, portable, divisible, uniform, limited in supply, and accepted. Measuring only “6.4-9.5 millimeters in length” wampum was often “formed into larger objects, such as strings or belts” making it both durable and portable. Though wampum existed before the Europeans made contact with Native Americans, the metal drills that accompanied traders allowed for precision in the drilling of the shells that led to uniformity in manufacturing. Primitive tools lacked the ability to create the fine holes achieved with

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6 Dean R. Snow The Iroquois no. 78
European equipment. The supply was limited as significant labor accompanied the creation of a wampum belt. Its value was linked directly to the fur trade where it was assigned value in relation to the availability of beaver furs procured by the Iroquois, making it divisible and exchangeable for another desired resource. Though prior to Native American contact the shells had no worth to Europeans, wampum became backed on the trust in the “negotiability of wampum for valuable beaver”\(^9\) (844), showing its acceptability as currency. During the 17\(^{th}\) century, wampum effectively served the purpose of a medium of exchange between Iroquois and Europeans because of its characteristics.

Reciprocity in Iroquois society illustrates a dynamic function of wampum upon its acceptance as currency, as it provided a means to obtain societal influence. The Iroquois believed that “property belonged to those individuals and kin groups who needed and made active use of them”\(^10\). Iroquois leaders gained standing within their tribe based on their ability to provide for the community. In order to obtain higher status it was necessary to trade for items needed, not solely for personal gain, but for the good of the tribe. As trade grew increasingly more frequent between the Iroquois and Europeans, it became easier to acquire more items that could be redistributed by Iroquois leaders throughout their tribe. The French trader Pierre Radisson illustrates the societal emphasis on reciprocity during his time as an Iroquois captive when he states “My father feasted 300 men that day” and continues to show redistribution by gifts as he received “a necklace of porcelaine”\(^11\). Wampum as currency to purchase the communal goods is seen in an account from Robert Livingston, a prominent Dutch trader in the late 1600’s, when a group of natives on the Hudson River purchased “for the wampum they gave us…25 Dutch pounds of powder 50 pounds of lead and good smelling tobacco, ½ barrel of beer, packages for powder, and 1 bushel of peas”\(^12\).

\(^10\) The World on the Turtles Back no. 22
\(^11\) Radisson, Pierre E. 1651-1654. “Voyages of Pierre Esprit Radisson” no. 70
\(^12\) Livingston, Robert. *The Livingston Indian Records 1666 1732*. The Pennsylvania Historical Society. No. 38
Iroquois leaders adapted wampum as a commodity capable of augmenting their status as providers for society, showing the economic nature of the beads beyond cultural value.

The Iroquois showed economic motivation influenced by reciprocity with the desire to maximize utility while exerting minimal effort by trading for instead of manufacturing wampum. The manufacture of wampum was a labor intensive process that required the European tools introduced between 1598 and 1601 to create with uniform precision. The Iroquois had the incentive, and utilized the opportunity to come into possession of larger amounts of the shells by engaging in trade. The desire is seen in a 1626 letter “from Isaac DeRasieres, the Dutch secretary-bookkeeper” who wrote of a group of Natives who came to New Amsterdam “for no other reason than to get sewan [wampum]”14. Rationalistic ideals are illustrated as the Natives too had the tools to produce “large quantities of wampum beads for English trade”15, but rather traded with the Europeans for those that were already made. In 1634, Dutch explorer Harmen van den Bogaert wrote of the Iroquois willingness to exchange their goods for wampum as he “bought a very fat turkey for 2 hands of sewant [wampum], which the chief cooked for us.”16 The incentive to minimize time and effort shows acknowledgment of rationalistic concepts as only “36-48 beads per day”17 could be produce while more than 300 beads, in 1626, could be gained with the trade of “two and one-half beaver skins”18. While wampum remained culturally significant to the Iroquois, the methods they employed to procure the beads shows self-interest incorporated into their decisions. The Iroquois utilitarian pursuit of fulfilling the desires of their community in the least costly manner demonstrates the dynamic aspect of wampum as a medium of exchange.

Rationalistic ideas are also exhibited by the Iroquois through their ability and desire to gain influence over the distribution of wampum to other tribes. Though the Iroquois possessed the ability to manufacture wampum, mass production of the shell beads came from the coastal Algonquian tribes. In 1631 the Pequot, an Algonquian tribe, attempted “to secure a monopoly” over the manufacturing of wampum, only to be attacked by the Dutch in 1634 and English in 1636 due to their regulation of the shell beads. After the English victory in 1637 that concluded the Pequot War, the Mohawk Iroquois demonstrated their focus on rationalistic ideals and the acquisition of wampum by siding with English and offered no quarter to the defeated Pequot. Harm was minimized in the Mohawks decision. Offering aid to the Pequot would have conflicted with the traditional meaning of wampum that signifies binding truth, as the Mohawk “already accepted a gift of wampum from the Narragansetts”, an Algonquian tribe sided with the English. The motivation of the Mohawk actions rested on the economic incentive coming from the ability to control wampum distribution. Both rationalistic and traditional beliefs regarding the use of wampum to the Iroquois during the Pequot war were exhibited. Predominantly, the overarching focus on self-interest dictated the means to acquire more wampum; however the traditional meaning of the shell beads was not lost.

The Iroquois adapted their practices in order to trade with the Europeans, as wampum took on a new function as currency in addition to its original purpose as a cultural element. As is described in the Iroquois narrative The Epic of the Peacemaker, the function of wampum beads is that they “must be used to console the one who has lost by death a near relative.” Though the beads did not lose their traditional significance, a shift in the role of wampum existed in that the purpose of the beads developed new meaning to accommodate the change brought by the Europeans. The

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19 Snow The Iroquois no. 113
20 Snow The Iroquois no. 113
21 “The Dekanawida Legend.” New York State Museum no. 14-31
Iroquois considered the economic incentive of the new opportunities that came with European trade to a greater extent in order to maximize utility. The Iroquois displayed logic of profit maximizing consumers by trading for wampum with the country that offered the highest exchange. Conscience of the Iroquois rationalistic ideals, Isaac DeRasieres wrote “we could overtake French or English sloops here” by increasing the amount of wampum given for fur to “three or four hands”.

The wampum trade minimized effort by the Iroquois in order to obtain the means for bringing in Europe goods that could be redistributed amongst their society, and gave the English and Dutch a way to procure furs for export. The interdependence created by the wampum exchange shows how both Natives and Europeans needed to cooperate in order to reach the shared goal of maximizing economic utility. To each society the form of the utility differed, though a common goal was present.

Wampum served as the focal point for the developing relations between the Iroquois and Europeans in the 17th century as it created a link between the culturally distinct groups, shown by the European ability to amend their practices. Europeans used wampum in its traditional purpose as a symbol of commitment during negotiations as is seen “when the Lenape and colonials met to discuss and resolve various issues, presentations (‘gifts’) of formal wampum were made”.

In relation to the issue of forming alliances, in 1687, the Governor of Virginia wrote to the “five Nations of the Indians in the Fort att New Yorke…ye Chain of Friendship shall bee still Continued, And as an assurance yt it shall on my part…Doe give to ye severall Nations a hundred gilders of Wampum” showing the Dutch understood Iroquois traditional value of wampum. As is stated by a Jesuit missionary in 1645, the purpose of wampum holds “the same function as writing and

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contracts among us”\textsuperscript{25} illustrating Europeans recognized the diplomatic function of the shell beads. The English and Dutch realized the cultural significance of wampum to the Iroquois, and understood that gift giving was essential to strengthening relations with their trading partners. During contact at Fort Niagara “British Leaders…expressed their wishes using Native oratory styles”\textsuperscript{26}, representing European efforts to augment their perception by the Natives. The traditional use of wampum, demonstrates the ability for romanticist interpretations of the beads to coexist with rationalistic pursuits of utility by both the Europeans and Iroquois.

Ultimately, the dynamic nature of wampum signifies its importance in creating the first international economic system between Native Americans and Europeans. Its adaptability as a colonial currency shows the Europeans recognized its strategic importance in early America through its utilization in trade and negotiations. The added meaning given to wampum by Native Americans beyond its historical significance to their culture is fundamental in the understanding of economic motives. Regardless of its lack of intrinsic value the beads took on a new purpose to the degree that its acquisition was sought throughout Iroquoia. Rationalistic ideals were held by Natives as the incentive for trade outweighed production of wampum. In a more realistic analysis of Native tribes, it is essential to consider their traditional beliefs as generations of history are not replaced by the simple observation of a newcomers. Wampum necessitated the adaption of two different cultures to find a suitable medium of exchange in an effort for both the Iroquois and English and Dutch, to reach their own goals.

\textsuperscript{25} Rasmussen, Birgit Brander. “Negotiating Peace, Negotiating Literacies” no. 445
\textsuperscript{26} Peña, Elizabeth S. 2006. “Wampum Diplomacy: The Historical and Archaeological Evidence for Wampum at Fort Niagara.” 
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