



Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project

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Wôpanâak language, culture, and history misrepresented in latest “true story” of American Thanksgiving—National Geographic’s “Saints & Strangers”

(MASHPEE, MA) Leadership from the four Wampanoag tribal communities (including the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, the Aquinnah Wampanoag, the Assonet Band, and the Herring Pond Wampanoag) served by the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project today released a statement decrying the many cultural, historical, and linguistic inaccuracies in the National Geographic’s (Nat Geo) production “Saints & Strangers” that aired this past weekend.

The Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project (WLRP.org) was originally approached last spring by Nat Geo producers seeking the assistance of our linguists in developing Wôpanâak language content for “Saints and Strangers” scripts. Producers also sought to develop contracts with local Wampanoag cultural experts and historians, and with Wôpanâak language teachers to provide dialogue coaching for cast members. Wôpanâak language is the correct language spoken in this region of Cape Cod, and during the historical period addressed in “Saints & Strangers.”

WLRP’s longstanding policy over the past two decades requires that material submitted for translation into Wôpanâak language must be vetted for historical and cultural accuracy by the Wampanoag community, so that the language will not be misused or appropriated into an improper context by non-Wampanoag people. WLRP’s linguists, board of directors, and voting student members of the WLRP language committee initially expressed support for a collaboration with Nat Geo producers.

“I spent hours consulting with the writers before any of the script was created,” said Jessie Little Doe Baird WLRP co-founder and linguistic director. Baird also serves as vice chair of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, and worked hard to convey to Nat Geo writers and producers the importance of de-mythologizing the “false Thanksgiving narrative commonly portrayed in American history.”

Unfortunately, when Baird last summer began reviewing grossly historically inaccurate and offensive script content, Nat Geo not only refused to correct these misrepresentations, they also proposed contracts removing WLRP’s authority to only provide translations for historically and culturally accurate content. WLRP then declined to provide translations, dialogue coaching, or cultural expertise to the production, despite already investing many hours providing historically true and culturally accurate information to Nat Geo’s writers.

WLRP member and advisor Linda Coombs, Aquinnah Wampanoag, who directs the Aquinnah Wampanoag Cultural Center on Martha's Vineyard also spent long hours working with Baird to review and comment on the problematic draft scripts for the benefit of the Nat Geo production team. Their recommendations were ignored.

WLRP's leadership has not yet viewed "Saints & Strangers," so we cannot comment on the final cut; however, the language used is not indigenous to Cape Cod or to eastern Massachusetts, and the shoddy material culture on display in clips released by Nat Geo are poorly conceived reproductions of 17th century Wampanoag regalia and ceremonial practices.

While "Western Abenaki" is indeed a sister language to Wôpanâak, Wampanoag people would never purport to tell Abenaki history in our own language. The languages are distinctive and separate. For example, Abenaki is an "L" Algonquian language, while Wôpanâak language does not use an "L" at all, and is instead an "N" Algonquian language. The Abenaki and Wôpanâak languages exhibit many additional grammatical and morphological differences, so it is unfortunate that Nat Geo's translator spuriously represents "western Abenaki" as a "sophisticated amalgamation" of New England's indigenous languages. Not only are these statements patently false, but Algonquian language community leaders regularly communicate and meet with one another to discuss our language work and how we can collaborate and support one another – most recently this past spring at an Algonquian language gathering in Maine. Wôpanâak language teachers, students, and linguists urge Abenaki people and speakers to sternly address their translator who has, in exchange for financial remuneration, misrepresented his own language as a poor substitute for Wôpanâak, in order to promote Nat Geo's inaccurate and harmful portrayal of Wampanoag history.

About the Wôpanaak Language Reclamation Project

WLRP is a twenty-two year-old nonprofit organization serving four tribal communities of Wampanoag People. Our mission is to reclaim Wôpanâak language as the principal means of expression within the Wampanoag Nation. The Wampanoag community is the first Native American community to reclaim a language with no living speakers in many generations. This groundbreaking, unprecedented language revitalization has been possible due to the existence of hundreds of documents written by Wampanoag people who became the first Natives in the English-speaking New World to develop and use an alphabetic writing system. Today in 2015, over 150 years after the language went dormant, the reclamation of Wôpanâak language is both vital to the cultural and spiritual foundation of the thousands of Wampanoag who cherish their ancestors' words, and provides the world with a powerful expression of indigenous survival that can provide inspiration and hope all across Indian Country. Visit us online at WLRP.org or on [Facebook.com/WLRPorg](https://www.facebook.com/WLRPorg)

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